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"Just before he reached the intended fort there was a rush behind, and something heavy landed on his back." See page 57.

Chums of the Prairie

BY

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"Sunset Ranch," "Rival Canoe Boys," "The Young Range Riders,"
"Canoe and Camp-Fire," etc.

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Chums of the Prairie

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CONTENTS.

The Lone Dugout 7

Paradise Camp 20

The Bear Den in the Coulee 32

How Karl Got His Elk 45

The Gray Terror in the Pine 58

Trouble in the Air 71

Those "Bad Men" 84

A Memory of the Stampede 97

Winter in the Wilderness 111

The Gallant Old Elk at Bay 126

The Bear That Went Fishing 135

An Invasion of the Wolves 147

Tatters Sounds the Alarm 161

Bounding Horse Comes Into Camp 174

The Flight From the Happy Land 187

Adrift on the Current 200

The Lone Vidette 213

How Cuthbert Did It 225

The Fire Gantlet 239

Back to Dear Old Sunset Ranch 252

CHUMS OF THE PRAIRIE.

CHAPTER I.

THE LONE DUGOUT.

Two boats, plain, roomy dugouts, well loaded with a winter's outfit, were pushing slowly against the current of a stream deep in the heart of the mysterious Big Horn range of mountains, as the shadows of coming night began to lend a weird aspect to the heavy pine timber covering the banks.

The pilot-boat contained but one figure, a man long past the meridian of life, yet whose arms plied the paddle or setting pole with a vigor that age had not diminished.

Two sturdy lads occupied the second craft, none other than our young friends of Sunset Ranch, Cowboy Karl and his chum, Cuthbert Lee.

Since early dawn they had pushed up this same serpentine creek, cheered by the intelligence from their guide and mentor, Old Sile, that the long and wearisome voyage would reach its conclusion about sundown.

Worn out with their exertions, they had long since lapsed into silence, so that beyond an occasional grunt from the guide there was no sound to be heard save the swish of paddles or the gurgle of the clear, cold water against the prow of each boat.

Old Sile was eagerly scanning his surroundings as seen in the gloaming.

Some years had passed since last he spent a winter in the wilderness, and more or less changes had taken place during that time; but his keen eye recognized many familiar objects that undoubtedly aroused vivid memories of adventures in the past.

When finally he uttered an exclamation of intense satisfaction, and turned shoreward, no urging with cowboy quirt or hackamore was needed to induce the boys to speedily follow his example.

So the two boats grounded, their occupants sprang out, and the bows were drawn snugly up on a little pebbly beach that seemed especially designed by nature for a landing.

"Alabama—here we rest!" sang out the Virginia lad, joyfully.

He seized Karl around the body, and both boys indulged in a genuine grotesque Indian dance, such as they had witnessed many a time in the villages of the Crows and Sioux.

Old Sile was feeling rather stiff himself after so many hours of cramped work in the boat, and could easily pardon this rollicking, boyish spirit, especially since it was indulged in with the idea of relaxing their muscles; but he busied himself with the more profitable task of unloading some of the boat stores.

Karl, always quick to take a hand, was speedily helping, while Cuthbert, to whom clung some of the Southern habits, chose first to glance around, filled with eager curiosity concerning this home in the vast wilds to which Old Sile had led them, and which was to be their stamping ground for long months. From the sombre depth of the timber came the tremulous cry of the screech owl, sounding very familiar to Cuthbert and bringing to his mind the grand forests of his dearly beloved Virginia,

where he had tramped, gun or rod in hand, many a time in search of fin, fur or feather.

There was no sign of any shack or cabin in this primeval wilderness, but Cuthbert did not wonder at such absence, for he was well aware that so old and cautious a campaigner as Sile would never build his habitation in the open, where it might be seen by every hostile Indian who chanced to pass up or down the creek.

Somewhere in that thick tangle he had a secluded den, but in spite of numerous questions, he had kept the boys quite in the dark concerning its character. In consequence they had the liveliest curiosity imaginable with regard to the structure which was to be their home while the frost king held dominion over mountain, valley and plain.

Just now, however, they were so tired that both would gladly have camped on the spot.

And the veteran knew they would not take the interest they should in what he had in store unless first refreshed by supper.

Accordingly, he gave Karl the signal to start a little blaze, over which the coffee-pot was soon merrily singing, while the appetizing odor of bacon tantalized the hungry trio almost to the point of desperation.

When Karl sounded the tocsin by rapping on a tin kettle the others lined up, finding seats on a convenient log.

There is no appetizer like fatigue and fresh air, and ceremony being thrown to the winds, each one made away with the food with ridiculous haste, eager to appease the demands of nature.

The fire crackled and snapped, the creek, as yet free from ice, gurgled on its way toward the Big Horn, and from the woods came various noises of the night; but the three pilgrims who had penetrated this wilderness ven-

tured not a word in the line of conversation until they had, by industrious work, taken the edge off their appetite.

By degrees, however, their jaws wearied of the fray, and one remark broke the ice, so that presently they were chatting on various topics connected in some way with their crusade.

The boys found their curiosity reawakened with regard to the hermitage of which their old friend and guide had so frequently spoken, and declaring that their weariness of body had quite departed, they demanded that he satisfy their desire to set eyes on the same without any more delay.

In truth the veteran was secretly anticipating some such move on their part, and had laid his plans accordingly. He felt an intense desire to ascertain whether the old nest that had sheltered him several winters past still defied the elements, for though uncouth in many of his ways and blunt of speech, Old Sile could cherish deep down in his heart a sincere affection for a snug nest which had served him faithfully as a home during one or more winters.

Education and culture are not at all necessary elements in awakening such a feeling in the heart of man—indeed, more often they serve as obstacles, blunting nature's tributes.

Supper being over, the old ranger lighted his pipe and then announced himself ready to lead the way to the spot where his former quarters had been located.

"It ain't fur off—jest 'longside the hill yonder," he declared, encouragingly, designating the particular spot with a wave of his hand, though the boys could not see any sign of an elevation in the darkness by which the lone camp was surrounded.

Old Sile picked up a blazing fagot which would serve fairly well as a torch.

"Not without yer guns, boys; never go anywhere without weepons. Foller that plan an' it'll keep ye out of much trouble, p'raps save yer thatch some day," the old sage drawled impressively, with an earnestness born of long experience.

Karl should have known better—Karl, who had spent most of his life on the range and encountered the vicissitudes of fortune such as fall to a cowboy's lot.

He picked up his gun rather sheepily, for it was his secret ambition to stand well in the opinion of the veteran.

Leaving the campfire sparkling in the rear, Old Sile led the boys up through the dense forest growth.

How grotesque the tall trees looked in the weird light of that waving torch!

More than once Cuthbert was positive he could detect curious eyes fixed upon them, belonging to some of the woods folk; but whatever animals these were, they slunk away before the torchlight betrayed their identity.

Old Sile was pleased to see such evidence that the adjacent timber had again been peopled by those animals driven away by the presence of man, when he and his trapping pard last wintered in this locality.

Thicker grew the forest, until it was only with some difficulty they pushed their way through the creepers and underbrush.

"Look!" he said, with a strange, husky tremor in his voice, "thar she is, lads, just as me and poor Bob Ruggles left her three years ago."

They strained their eyes and discovered a rude log house that seemed to be built against the face of the hill —overgrown with creepers, and half hidden by fallen leaves and dead branches, so that one might have passed

within ten feet of the door without suspecting its presence.

"Why, it's a regular dugout," said Karl, who had more than once lived in such a place.

Old Sile chuckled. It did him good to again set eyes on this lone habitation.

"That's what it is, my boy, all of it, and as cozy a den as ye were ever in. Many's the night Bob and me sat in yonder as snug as two bugs in a rug, while the wild norther tore through the mountains and screeched like a army o' demons let loose. Let's go inside and see if she's dry as ever."

Another moment and he was at the door, which was discovered to be loose, one of the deerskin hinges having parted.

Just as Old Sile put his hand out and drew the wrecked door further ajar, there was a sudden flurry inside the structure, a wild screech, and then a heavy body, with glaring eyes, came springing through space.

The veteran might be taken by surprise, but his presence of mind never deserted him, so when he saw this fearful shape coming through space directly at him, he struck out with the blazing torch and landed a center shot.

"Fair ball!" cried Cuthbert, as he saw the uncanny creature knocked clear back into the cabin by the force of the sudden and violent concussion.

Karl, always quick to act, had pushed forward under Old Sile's arm, his gun thrust out and a nervous finger on the trigger.

"Steady, lad; atween the eyes, now," cautioned the veteran, coolly.

The wildcat had landed on the floor and was crouching for another spring when Karl's rifle spoke.

That ended the trouble. A few kicks, together with

most fearful growls, and the savage brute yielded up the ghost.

Cautiously our friends entered, but there seemed to be no further danger—the wicked beast lay stretched upon the floor, incapable of creating damage, since Karl had fortunately shot to kill.

"I like that; it speaks well for what is in store for us," declared Cuthbert, stooping to examine the defunct animal.

"What I calls a warm reception like. The critter's evidently been makin' hisself to home here. Reminds me o' the time a bar climbed through the windy yonder, and when Bob walked in thar was ole Bruin settin' on the floor gobbling up a bucket o' wild honey we'd got out o' a bee tree.

"They was some hot times around here just then, I'll tell ye; and Bob had an argyment with mister bear that lasted nigh on half an hour. When I kim along thar he was a sittin' on the ole thief, covered from head to foot with blood and honey. Such a job as it was to clean up after that ere Irish wake," and the old fellow chuckled, as in imagination he again saw the ludicrous spectacle.

"See here, this is the queerest bobcat I've ever run across! Seems to have tassels on his ears, I declare," announced Cuthbert.

At this Old Sile condescended to examine his fallen enemy a little closer.

"Wall, I declar to Moses, if it just ain't one o' them air miserable Canada lynx chaps, the fust I ever see 'round these parts. P'raps it was jest as well yer lead clipped his heart, Karl, for they do say these here fancy cats beat all creation in a scrimmage, and if given half a chance I reckon he'd a done some tall scratchin' among us fellers. I'm just as pleased to see him stretched out."

"And here's our first pelt. We're beginning early," declared Cuthbert.

The boys now remembered their curiosity concerning the shelter that was to be their home for five long winter months, so leaving the dead cat where it had kicked its last, they set about a little tour of discovery.

Dugouts may vary in size or elegance, but they are invariably of one pattern—a cave in the face of a hillside, with some sort of a log cabin built in front. A lowly habitation, no doubt, but extraordinarily cool in summer and warm in winter, as those who have ever spent much time in such a rude shelter will positively affirm.

Usually the fireplace is in the back part of the underground section, the smoke escaping through a rough chimney fashioned out of sod.

Old Sile had found the stump of a tree above, which served admirably as a funnel, or chimney, though there was always more or less risk of its taking fire at some time when the occupants of the lowly home beneath raised a hotter blaze than ordinarily.

The place was in fair condition considering that several seasons had passed since last it had human occupants.

A couple of bunks had been built in the inner sanctuary, with good stout pine as the basis, and there was quite sufficient room for a third of the same character.

Besides, there was a rude but serviceable table, rustic and comfortable chairs, some shelves, a very elaborate cupboard and other evidences of genuine luxury, proving that the two trappers, finding that time hung heavy on their hands during furious blizzards, had resorted to this means of occupying their minds rather than be idle.

A few fairly-serviceable cooking utensils still hung where they had been abandoned, while upon the wall ant-

lers of a big elk, together with some other mementoes of the chase, gave this dugout the air of a hunters' camp.

Karl was well pleased, while Cuthbert fairly bubbled over with enthusiasm.

This was what he had dreamed of while roving the Virginia woods in search of small game—a cot in some vast wilderness, far away from the haunts of men, where with congenial friends he might spend happy days in the pursuit of game.

That time had come, and Cuthbert felt as though life could have no dearer wish.

Old Sile was happy, too. He looked fondly on these familiar things that aroused pleasant memories of the past, and then his wrinkled face took on a solemn look as he suddenly bethought him of that jovial partner, whose voice he would hear no more.

"This is just splendid," declared Cuthbert.

"Yes, with these leaves swept out and some cleaning done, we'll be ready to go to housekeeping right away," said Karl.

"I'm right glad you like it, boys. It can't be beat fur comfort when snow flies. All ye want is a good stock o' wood for the fire and ye kin larf at any storm. Now, shall we hustle the duffle up hyar now or wait till mornin'?"

Karl looked at Cuthbert.

Then both laughed.

"To tell the truth, I'm a little sore in the arms after such a day of paddling and poling," admitted the former.

"And though you did the lion's share of it, Karl, I'm pretty nearly dead. I vote we camp by the fire and move to-morrow," said the Virginia lad, candidly.

"Second the motion," put in Old Sile, who knew the condition of his *protégées,* and considered it a sensible thing to do.

So they hung up Mr. Bobcat outside, pushed the loose door to, and made their way back to where the little fire still burned cheerily.

It was easier work, now that a passage had been forced through the tangled undergrowth, and Karl knew all this would speedily be set to rights when the old ranger got down to business, for he was a hustler at such things, and would never put up with untidy surroundings.

For the last time the tent was raised and arrangements made for passing the night.

Old Sile seemed to be thoroughly aroused by this revisit to old scenes, and as he calmly puffed away, crouched there before the cheery blaze, he related experiences that very naturally thrilled the two lads, since they were now in the vicinity where these occurrences had taken place, and in a fair way to meeting with just such adventures before the breaking up of winter came.

Cuthbert's ears were on the alert all the time. Those strange sounds from the dense pine forests interested him intensely. Later on the silence of death would come upon this region, when the grip of the ice king had sealed the creek, and two feet or more of snow covered the face of the earth, but while the denizens of the woods kept up their nightly serenade, it was bound to be sweet music in his ears.

The last sound he remembered hearing ere sinking into sleep, was the merry gurgle of the stream as it flowed past the submerged sterns of the dugouts.

Then oblivion.

Probably Cuthbert never slept more soundly in all his life, for as he had declared, he was "clean tuckered out" by the hard labor of the day. This bucking against a strong current hour after hour is no child's play, and the sturdiest logger on Michigan rivers grows weary of it in time.

Nevertheless, Cuthbert was wide awake in a twinkling when the discharge of a rifle boomed upon the night air.

Starting up to a sitting posture he discovered that it was Old Sile this time who had taken toll of the woods folk.

Something was stretched out on the ground just under the limb where they had taken the pains to hang such of their stores as might be apt to tempt the appetite of a hungry night prowler.

The old veteran was chuckling quietly to himself, as though vastly amused.

Karl had already crawled out of his snug blanket, intent upon discovering the nature of the bold intruder who had paid so dearly for his rashness.

"It's a wolf, and the biggest of his kind," he announced presently.

After that Cuthbert could not have been coaxed to remain in his blanket, for ever since the time when those snapping wolves so nearly ended his young career he had experienced the most bitter feelings toward the whole class, and would go miles out of his way to knock over one of the sneaking "varmints," as Old Sile called them collectively.

"Great Scott! what a whopper," he exclaimed, as his eyes beheld the proportions of the great gaunt creatures and noted the cruel white fangs which the drawn back lips exposed.

Secretly Cuthbert was wishing it had been through his instrumentality the monster had come to his doom; but there was satisfaction in the reflection that where one of his breed was so readily found there must be plenty more of the same stock.

Could Cuthbert have seen into the future a little way, he might not have experienced so great a yearning for

such a meeting, since he was destined to have his fill of adventures with lupine foes ere long.

"A genuine gray, mountain wolf, the boldest, fiercest and gamest in the Northwest," announced Old Sile, turning the gaunt beast over so that he might discover whether his lead had gone exactly where he intended it should, and the grim smile that illuminated his homely but genial face announced that he was perfectly satisfied.

The conditions seemed to promise much sport, and even the old ranger declared the country better stocked with game than he had ever known it to be, all of which gave Cuthbert a feeling of secret ecstasy.

Whether the fate of this bold pirate served as a dreadful warning to his predatory comrades, or whether they lacked his dash, could not be told, but at least they kept aloof during the remainder of the night, though their long-drawn, mournful howls occasionally smote the silence that had fallen upon the vicinity.

When Cuthbert awoke in the morning the scent of coffee was in the air, the fire snapped and blazed cheerily, and Old Sile was engaged in measuring the distance between the ground and the branch where he had hung the meat that had tempted mister wolf to his destiny.

"Ye see," the veteran explained, "it was him a jumpin' up and fallin' back that woke me. Once he fastened his teeth into the haunch o' venison, but broke loose. That ere was a jump to be proud of. Jest look at it, my boy. And see hyar, I declar to Moses, if thar ain't the marks o' teeth on that rope I used to haul the things up by, jest as if the ornery critter knowed they'd tumble if he gnawed that through. Sometimes I've a notion them pesky wolves has got a streak o' the Old Nick in 'em. Leastwise they seem more'n half human."

And the more the Virginia lad saw of the mountain

wolf the greater became his respect for the gray freebooter's sagacity.

Breakfast was soon dispatched, and never had the coffee seemed more aromatic or the venison steak more tender than on this, the first morning of their arrival in the genuine heart of the wilderness. All nature was crisp and bright around them, and Cuthbert seemed to experience an exhilaration that almost tempted him to shout aloud, just as if he were a schoolboy, and the long-yearned-for last day before vacation had arrived.

CHAPTER II.

PARADISE CAMP.

Both boys were eager to begin the work of transferring their goods to the domicile that was to shelter them during their winter campaign.

All of them loaded up and made a carry to the dugout, where Sile started in to have things cleaned up by the time his companions had "toted" the last of the traps—blankets, provisions, culinary utensils and other odds and ends—over the trail between creek and cabin.

They worked like young Trojans, knowing certain things must be done before their old guide would consent to set a trap or open up any of the secrets connected with the wilderness.

By noon a tremendous transformation had been effected in the neighborhood of the dugout, and the interior really presented an appearance of solid comfort.

Old Sile had built another bunk for himself, while the boys arranged the stores and in many ways gave a homelike air to the place.

Indeed, they found so many things to do that dinner was postponed until night, a hasty "snack" at noon allaying the pangs of hunger without wasting precious time.

Cuthbert yearned to take a little stroll around, to discover what the immediate neighborhood was like, and Karl could read his comrade like a book, so in the generosity of his heart he started the other out to pick up some game for supper, while he and Sile cut a heap of firewood and continued the job of arranging things for their united comfort.

Karl was somewhat different from most boys of his

age, and had an old bachelor's ideas of looking to the eternal fitness of things, with a place for every article. On the other hand, Cuthbert had a happy faculty for tossing things pell-mell, and then depending upon his chum to assist in disentangling the snarl when an occasion arose.

So, being opposites in many regards, they got along splendidly together.

When young Lee started out he meant to go only a short distance and make a circuit around the camp. Full well he knew the danger of losing his way, since he had not as yet secured his bearings, and having been through one such experience, Cuthbert did not hanker after repeating it so early in the season.

The wintry breath could already be felt in the bracing air; indeed, a little fringe of ice along the border of the creek at sunrise had given plain warning that the season was about to change, and at any time they might look for the first snowfall.

But at this hour of the day it was simply grand in the primeval forest, and Cuthbert felt as happy as a lord while he strolled along, his eyes ever on the alert for signs of game.

This was a wonderful change from the life he had been leading a year or so back, scouring the plains on horseback, "milling" cattle, watching saddle horses as a "night wrangler," branding youngsters at the grand "roundup" and experiencing all the wild distraction that marks the career of a cattleman.

Here was solitude, here the grand woods reared their lofty crests far above his head, and the whispering pines told the mysterious secrets of centuries.

And game? That was a red fox slinking down yonder ravine; here a wolf dashed pell-mell through the scanty undergrowth, as an unintentional sneeze on the boy's part

gave him a sudden scare, and several times Cuthbert had fleeting glimpses of deer that had been disturbed, perhaps by the clumsiness of his approach.

He knew he was faulty as a still hunter, and needed the lessons Old Sile so cheerfully promised to give. He knew his boots were not at all equal to deerskin moccasins when it came to sneaking up on game; but Cuthbert had seen these things done when a prisoner among the tepees of the Sioux, and believed he could acquire the hunter's tread with but little instruction.

And yet he was far removed from being a greenhorn in the broad sense of the word, having earned the full fledged title of cowboy through working up every round of the ladder.

Thus sweeping around the camp he struck the stream again, half a mile above—at least, he took it for granted it was the same old creek they had paddled and poled up for some two whole days and more.

A small flock of late-staying ducks, apparently mallards, sported upon the water and Cuthbert wished he had the scatter gun along so that he might have sent confusion into their midst, and secured a trio for supper.

As it was he saw them fly away with the keen chagrin your true sportsman experiences when his hand is stayed by circumstances beyond his control.

Better luck another day. They went down the creek and might yet be found near the camp. Deer and elk they expected to secure all through the cold spell, but the time for the webfoots had almost expired, and consequently this eagerness to secure the last of their kind was only natural.

While scouting around Cuthbert discovered a place where the creek was narrow, and a very convenient swinging wild grape vine offered a splendid chance to cross.

Slinging his rifle to his back by means of the convenient strap, he seized hold of the vine, tested it thoroughly, made a little run, jumped into the air and landed on the other bank before one could say Jack Robinson.

It was a snap, and he meant to remember the exact location of this remarkable swinging bridge for future use. Karl must also see and experience the pleasure of a flying passage—Karl, who was ever in his mind; Karl, the dearest, sturdiest, most devoted chum on earth. The spirit of true comradeship did not die out when David and Jonathan or Damon and Pythias ceased to exist, for in this prosaic latter age of ours men and boys may be found intensely devoted to each other, and ready to make even such mutual sacrifices as those ancient worthies.

On the other side of the stream the woods seemed to be even heavier than any he had as yet come across.

Cuthbert felt charmed with it all.

Why, there was a spirit of sport in the very atmosphere with which he was surrounded. A rustling here and there amid the dead leaves told that the gentle little woodsfolk were keenly alive to this foreign presence in their midst, and many curious eyes doubtless spied upon him from tangled coverts.

He tingled with pleasurable anticipations of the royal sport awaiting them during the period of their isolation in this lonely region.

Although Cuthbert had not as yet paid any particular attention to the fact, he was now favored by what little breeze the afternoon afforded, since it met him full in the face.

Suddenly he made a discovery that caused him to stand as still as a rock. Some animal was feeding in a small glade just ahead, and had thrown up its head.

Well, it was a deer, sure enough, and Cuthbert had hunted the light-footed creatures sufficiently to know that

if he remained perfectly motionless, there was at least a fair chance of the other taking him for a stump, and continuing its feed.

At any rate, he was determined to hazard a flying shot if the deer bounded away, as he should be capable of doing some execution with so trusty a rifle.

Then the deer went to feeding again, and Cuthbert's heart ceased to flutter, though it soon pounded between his ribs with such keen excitement as your true hunter necessarily feels when the noble quarry is in sight.

He slowly advanced, keeping his eye on the short tail of the deer.

A dozen steps—then Cuthbert paused.

This was surely near enough. It was a pot shot after all. They needed the venison, otherwise the chivalrous lad, with his Southern instinct of fair play toward such game, would have been sorely tempted to shout aloud and take his chances at a flying target.

At any rate, his nerves did not play him false, for when he drew his gun to the horizontal it never quivered in the least.

With the sudden sharp report the deer started to run, but made only a few leaps when it came crashing to the ground, and in another minute Cuthbert had his foot proudly upon his game.

He waved his hat in the air and gave one eager shout of exultation, which doubtless alarmed the smaller denizens of the great pine wood even more than the report of the gun had done.

Being a sensible lad, Cuthbert paid immediate attention to bleeding his game.

Besides, this was not by any means his first deer.

The quarry was too heavy to carry home, as he had done on several occasions with an antelope on the plains.

So he set to work removing the skin, and securing the choice portions.

It was a long and tedious job, for the young hunter had not as yet graduated in this particular branch of his calling.

At length, however, he had bound what meat he wanted inside the skin, and with a stout cord secured the whole to the limb of a tree.

Remembering the experience of the previous night, and with a healthy respect for the gymnastic abilities of these gray freebooters of the mountains, he was careful to place his prize at such an elevation that it would be secure from the most agile wolf on earth.

By this time the short afternoon had begun to wear to a close, and evening was at hand. In the heavy timber the shadows fell early, and Cuthbert knew it would in all probability be pitch dark ere he arrived in the vicinity of the camp.

He was wise enough to blaze the trees from the scene of his successful still hunt to the edge of the creek near at hand, and at this point he tied his handkerchief to a branch where it could be plainly seen by any one ascending the stream.

Then he pushed sturdily on.

At times he was forced by stress of circumstances and the lay of the land to bear away from the creek more or less, but always kept track of its gurgling, so that he might take advantage of the first favorable opportunity to reach the bank again.

Soon the shadows grew heavier, gloom fell upon the forest, and night had come.

Cuthbert was cheered, however, by a glow far ahead among the trees, which undoubtedly came from a fire his comrades had built upon the water's edge according to a prearranged plan. Old Sile had warned them that if

overtaken by darkness while in the woods the best thing to do was to find the stream and follow its course.

In due time Cuthbert reached a point opposite the camp, where he found Karl waiting with one of the boats, having been apprised of the hunter's coming by welcome shouts.

And when he saw that the other carried a couple of generous venison steaks, ample for their present needs, he knew the saunter of young Lee had not gone unrewarded.

The fire on the shore was quickly extinguished, as it had served its purpose, and they followed the trail to the dugout.

Cuthbert was delighted.

So many radical changes had taken place since his departure, and the interior looked so thoroughly like what he had pictured a true hunter's camp to be that the Virginian forgot his fatigue and loudly expressed his satisfaction.

He threw himself onto his bunk and experienced the most agreeable relief.

"It's good to be here, I tell you," he said, at which Karl, busied over the fire, smiled and nodded in his own quiet way, proving that he quite appreciated his friend's enthusiasm.

And when they discussed the venison, which was cooked to a queen's taste, Old Sile asked questions concerning the route taken, what the youngster had seen, and his impressions with regard to the game in the woods.

"So the ole swingin' grapevine is thar still, eh? That saved me a neat trick once and I've allers felt kindly toward it," he mused, lifting up a red ember for his pipe.

"Tell us what," demanded Cuthbert, who, somehow, had conceived that the vine was formerly used considerably.

Old Sile was not a champion yarn spinner; he got down

to facts too speedily for that; but it seldom required coaxing to induce him to relate any experience from his generous fund.

So he immediately fired away.

"It happened when Bob and me fust kim to this kentry. For once I was caught in summat o' a pickle. We didn't have no repeating guns in them days, ye know, and a feller had to make pretty sartin o' his game with the fust shot.

"I run acrost a big elk and he went down with a crash when I fired. Like a greenhorn, I ran forward to bleed him, and it jest sarved me right to have that critter jump up and charge me."

Old Sile lay back and laughed at the recollection of the amusing as well as exciting scene, though it must have been anything but ludicrous to him at the time.

"Well, thar we dodged back and forward, like a couple o' kids playing tag, but he guv me a hot chase, and several times I felt the rip o' his horns as he jest missed me when I dodged behind a tree.

"Thar was blood in that ole elk's eye, and I knowed he was bound to git me if he could.

"Jest about that time, as luck would have it, I caught sight o' that grapevine hanging over the creek, which was rather high and deep for the season, and an ijee came into my head which I lost no time in carryin' out.

"Watchin' my chance, I made a dash for it, with the bloomin' critter hot on my heels.

"If I'd missed my jump I'd a gone clean over my eyes in the drink, but having drapped my gun, I was able to snatch the vine and hold on with a death grip.

"The animile went flounderin' in, and before he could get a chance at me I had climbed up the vine into the tree.

"A wounded elk is about the toughest nut I ever

tackled, and I soon knowed he meant to keep me a prisoner thar, so I set to work to sarcumvent the critter.

"That was easy enough done, and I'll enter summat into particulars in case either o' ye ever get cotched up a tree with an angry animile below.

"I allers make it a practice to carry a hank o' cord in my pocket, and a piece o' stout wire that comes in handy for many different purposes.

"On this occasion I bent it in the shape o' a hook, tied it to the cord, and swingin' into the next tree, squirrel fashion, began a fishin' for my ole gun.

"That tuk me quite a time, as it was a hard job to lay holt o' the trigger guard; but after a while I began to git more expert like, ye know, and finally she came.

"In course it was all night wid Mr. Elk arter that, but he was a game chap, I tell 'ee, and thar be his horns over the fireplace."

The boys had ere now remarked upon the noble dimensions of those sturdy antlers, and since the story of their capture had proved so entertaining, they would regard them with redoubled interest.

Karl proposed that he and the old ranger go up after the venison—there was always a chance that it might be torn by wildcats, quick to be attracted by the scent of fresh meat, or perhaps tumbled down to hungry wolves and other animals below.

Besides, they felt as though a little exercise on the water would be enjoyable after their work around the camp.

Accordingly they left Cuthbert on duty and sallied forth, armed with guns and torches, the latter for use in following the blazed trail.

Karl was stationed in the bow, at the wish of his companion, with instructions to look out for any game while

on the way, and Old Sile used the paddle as to the manner born.

When one has been a guide in the Maine woods as a young man, lessons are learned that can never be forgotten. Such had been the experience of this remarkable ranger, and accounted for his adept way with the single blade.

It was a long and arduous voyage, bucking against a goodly current, and the clumsy dugout could bear no comparison with a bark canoe.

Karl kept constantly on the alert.

Many times he heard rustling in the bushes on either side of the stream, but caught no glimpse of game.

The torch they had ignited was suspended where its light would not dazzle the eyes of the intended marksman.

Its light, reflected upon the water and the sombre forest, lighted up the immediate scene with a weird and ghostly effect.

Karl, who always secretly admired an artistic dash of color, thought the voyage was well worth taking, even though they might fail to bag more game.

With him the booty was not everything when the senses were gratified.

So your true sportsman enjoys a day in the woods, communing with nature, even though he may not carry a gun.

Old Sile, though, who was more apt to look upon the commercial side of everything, expressed some disappointment because of their failure to make a strike.

He laid it to the fact that the clumsy old batteau, forced against the stream, made considerable racket that alarmed the suspicious animals before they came within reach.

More than once they heard a whistle among the bushes, followed by the stamp of retreating hoofs among the dead leaves—and Old Sile at least had the satisfaction of

knowing that game abounded in this paradise for sportsmen among the Big Horn hills.

At length Karl cried out that he had discovered the white signal on the bush, so their voyage was nearly ended.

Once on land it was a simple matter to follow the blazed trail until they came to the spot where Cuthbert had made his center shot.

And they were just in time, for a snarling animal retreated before their light, while several cries from the darkness around told that the scent of blood had aroused quite a sensation among the cat tribe.

Once or twice Karl half raised his gun as though sorely tempted to take a snap shot at that skulking, indistinct figure with the glowing yellow eyes; but somehow he hesitated, lest the result might be to stir up a tempest.

"Jest as well to let 'em go this time, lad," remarked Old Sile, "sence they're a pesky bad critter to only wound. When ye shoot a bobcat it's best to put your bullet through head or heart, or else riddle the onery beast with a load o' buckshot in a scatter gun."

And Old Sile did not speak from theory, but from a well-stocked experience.

They secured what they came after, and retreated again to the boat, leaving the remnants of the deer for the beasts of prey to snarl over.

Doubtless that little glade would present quite an animated scene presently, when wolf and wildcat, perhaps even a gray-coated panther, put in their rival claims for a share in the booty.

Karl guided the boat down stream, but their luck was no better than when ascending, since the deer had evidently not yet returned.

Thus closed the first day at Paradise Camp.

It had, after all, been quite eventful, and must be marked down with a white stone in memory's tablets.

On the morrow Old Sile meant to conceal the boats and remove some of the traces of their presence in the locality, for at this time the Sioux were more or less hostile, and would be apt to make trouble if by accident any hunting party chanced in this locality and discovered their hiding-place.

Constant vigilance was apt to be of more value than anything else.

And no doubt Old Sile would not have led his two youngsters into the region only that he deemed it the next thing to being absolutely safe.

When things were finally arranged to the satisfaction of the particular old ranger, they would be ready to start out upon the circuit of duties which had already in a measure been mapped for them.

Both lads were eager to begin.

They had been coached time and again by their sagacious old mentor, and in theory already knew just what cautious routine must be invariably followed in setting beaver traps, so that the suspicions of the easily alarmed colony might not be aroused.

Neither of the boys had as yet ever seen a beaver village, or the wonderful little animals at work constructing a dam, so they hoped Sile would soon give them a chance to take a peep at the residents of the flooded territory of which he had so often spoken.

Indeed, they anticipated many wonderful experiences while they remained at Paradise Camp, differing entirely from their life on horseback on the cattle ranch—experiences that would linger long in memory, whether they were of a pleasant character or partook of the dangerous element that necessarily enters into the welfare of a pioneer in the vast wilderness.

CHAPTER III.

THE BEAR DEN IN THE COULIE.

Busy days followed.

Old Sile was a good general, and took great pleasure in laying out a campaign while they sat around the evening meal, arranging details in the same satisfactory manner he had shown when assuming management of the grand roundup at Sunset Ranche.

Sometimes a change in the weather would necessitate a postponement of the arrangement, but there was always plenty to do inside during a stormy day.

Cuthbert had a taste for mounting specimens, and his work was so neatly done that birds and animals promised to assume very lifelike proportions when completed.

Of course for want of space he finished very few, leaving the balance in a condition to mount later, when he once more found himself on Virginia's red soil.

Old Sile had quite a desperate encounter one night in the dark with a gaunt wolf. Getting up thirsty, he groped his way in the direction of the water bucket, tripped over some object and fell full upon a hairy beast, which he carried down in his tumble.

There was a shout and some exceedingly lively threshing about on the floor.

Karl was up like a flash and struck a match, when a ludicrous sight presented itself—Old Sile, on his back on the floor, energetically embracing a half mounted specimen of a *lupus vulgaris* which Cuthbert had been working on in the evening, and carelessly left in the middle of the room.

The veteran made out that it was all a great joke, but

Karl secretly cherished the opinion that in his sleepy condition Sile had really imagined himself assailed by some wild beast. There had been too genuine a strain of alarm in that shout.

However, after that adventure it was noticed that Old Sile always glanced around to see that the decks were quite clear for action ere he "doused the glim" for the night.

It certainly would be apt to give any one something of a shock to tumble over a gaunt animal in the dark.

The boys often laughed about the affair in secret, and occasionally gave their old friend a sly rub when the opportunity arose, causing Sile to chuckle in his peculiar way, while a gleam of humor twinkled in his little gray eyes.

Some people are so happily constituted that they can even enjoy a joke at their own expense.

The boys soon found a chance to visit the beaver colony.

Old Sile, of course, showed them the way, and carried a few traps in order to commence operations before winter came in earnest.

He explained as he went, just what regulations must be employed in order to win success. Perhaps some of the conditions which he insisted upon may have seemed wholly unnecessary to the boys, but in time they would learn what cunning creatures beaver are and how quick to take alarm.

As they drew near the pond they heard a peculiar noise, as though some one were slapping the surface of the water with a flat board.

"They have heard us already—that's the signal of the fellow on guard. I kinder had an idea that change o' wind 'd do it. But thar will be other chances to see the leetle critters at work. Come on, boys," said Old Sile.

They no longer bothered with precautions, since the beaver would not be in sight.

The dam interested them greatly.

It was constructed in a scientific manner that would have done a civil engineer credit.

All around trees had been gnawed off by the sharp teeth of the beaver, so that the place had the appearance of considerable devastation.

The water thus backed up was just deep enough to almost cover the various mounds or beaver houses, allowing air to enter the top apartment, with water below.

When ice covered the surface they would be able to get the animals by stopping up the exit of their houses.

For the present traps were to be used.

Old Sile set a couple under the bank.

Usually these are put in place from a boat, so as to leave no trace of human presence, but there were ways Old Sile knew whereby this might be effectually remedied, and he wanted the boys to understand it all.

Indeed, the old fellow took the keenest pleasure in reviving his knowledge, and when things might have been done in a more modern way he would go to great trouble to show them just how they carried it out in the early days, when he had been a member of the famous Kit Carson trapper brigade.

From the beaver village they went to a dark, wild-looking gully, where Karl had discovered many bear trails, showing that there must be a den of some sort near by.

This day had been set apart for a thorough exploration of the defile.

It was too near home to let go any longer.

Several mornings they had found bear tracks around the cabin, as though Bruin had got a scent of their pro-

visions and yearned to make a raid before laying up for the winter.

The day was bright and cold.

Somehow the snow still held off, though none of them regretted this fact, knowing they would be heartily tired of it ere spring came.

In contrast the gully appeared most singularly dark and forbidding.

"Jest an ideal place for a bar's den, you'll say," declared the veteran, whose eye glowed with the eager light of anticipation. He was an old warhorse, and he sniffed the smoke of battle afar.

Karl, philosopher and stoic, in spite of his youth, said nothing, but more impulsive Cuthbert trembled with eagerness.

Slowly they moved up the cleft.

In many places Old Sile pointed out the marks of bear claws in the scanty soil.

"Thar's a hull fambly o' the rascals, I reckon, and the kingpin is a whopper, jedgin' from his tracks. Now here's a fine chance to git holt o' some barskin rugs cheap, boys."

"It's auction day," said Karl, smiling.

"And lead is the standard coin that fetches in the bargains," laughed Cuthbert.

Then their levity ceased, for it was a serious business upon which they had entered.

The ravine grew more rugged and wild as they proceeded, until the boys were forced to remark upon the conditions surrounding them. There were great masses of rocks, upon which gnarled trees and bushes clung in all manner of fantastic shapes, and at times progress was exceedingly difficult.

But the bear tracks showed them how to get around

these difficulties, and, besides, their guide had been here before.

"Thar's the den," said Old Sile.

Between two immense masses of rocks there yawned a black, forbidding aperture.

Cuthbert whistled.

Suppose the whole family of bears were in that gloomy hole, how were they to get at them?

He had known of an Indian who, single-handed, entered such a den, and succeeded in killing its ferocious occupant with only his knife as a weapon, but he bore many honorable scars on his face and body as mementoes of that terrible encounter at close quarters.

Cuthbert believed he could enjoy hunting quite as well as the next one, but he had no desire to beard a colony of wild bears in their den.

At the same time, he knew Old Sile too well to believe that the veteran would risk life and limb when there was no necessity for it.

Such follies he was content to allow others to monopolize—hot-blooded youngsters with a name to make, or ambitions Indians, eager to win renown as the Man Who Killed a Bear in His Den.

The sagacious ranger knew a trick or two whereby the mountain could be induced to come to Mahomet.

First of all, he surveyed the ground, and selected a couple of trees that stood not far from the yawning mouth of the bear den.

One of these he assigned to Karl, while the other Cuthbert could claim.

"Now git some wood and make a pile yonder by the open door," said the leader.

"Oh, it's smoke 'em out, you mean," exclaimed Cuthbert, quickly.

"Jest so. The neatest and quickest way of all. An', if

ye look sharp, ye kin see signs o' a fire on the rocks. This ain't the fust time it's been done here," and Old Sile unconsciously rubbed his left arm, where, as the boys knew, he carried the marks of long-healed wounds. Possibly they had been received in this same wild gulch years ago.

"Now," said he, when a pile of brush had been shoved into the opening, "I'm goin' to set her afire. You boys skedaddle to yer perches, an' shoot straight, mind. P'raps it might be a serious time for me if ye failed to drap the varmint."

Of course their nerves tingled with excitement, but subduing this as far as possible, they clambered up their respective trees and settled themselves as comfortably as possible.

"Ready?" sang out the ranger.

No sooner had they replied in the affirmative than he applied the match.

They fully anticipated that he would beat a hasty retreat when this had been done, and seek some safe lodgment in a tree.

Apparently Old Sile was not entirely satisfied with the way the fire was working, for he continued to act the part of stoker, shoving an armful of brush into the opening and pushing it further along with a long pole.

He wanted smoke rather than flame, but the draught was strong, and the blaze leaped up with sudden energy.

Then the unexpected happened.

There was a sudden, terrific roar, the burning brush flew in every direction, and out rushed a tremendous bear, showing every symptom of furious rage.

Old Sile had evidently not been expecting such speedy results.

Whether the bear actually knocked him over, or the

long pole tripped him up, neither of the boys was in a position to decide.

They saw him wallowing on the ground, and at the same instant were electrified to discover two more bears floundering through the *débris* of the fire.

Evidently this was more than had been bargained for, a wholesale delivery, in fact.

Old Sile was on his feet in a twinkling, being a hard man to keep down.

Moreover, he now clutched his gun, in place of the stoking-pole.

The big bear had sighted him, and was already floundering in his direction.

His only chance was to dodge and run, which he did instantly.

Bruin followed in hot haste.

The scene might have been ludicrous only for its tragic atmosphere, for Old Sile was undoubtedly more or less alarmed lest he fall into the clutches of his arch enemy.

A little affection may be a good thing, but the hug of a big bear is apt to be warmer than the average man desires.

As he scoured the rough ground, trying to look over his shoulder at the monster pursuer, and at the same time watch where he was going, Old Sile was shouting at the top of his lungs:

"Shoot him! Lay him out! Why don't ye cut loose, boys? Now's yer chance! Plumb center, d'ye mind?"

It was not so easy a thing to accomplish such a result. In the first place, the sudden appearance of bear in such quantities had very naturally astonished and bewildered the boys, for the gulch seemed full of wildly-running, long-haired varmints.

To aggravate matters still more, Old Sile while on the jump toward them was almost constantly between the

bear and their guns, so that should they attempt to cut loose there was more or less of a chance that he might receive what compliments they intended for Bruin.

The opportunity was getting brighter as the trapper drew closer to where they had perched, though, of course, he could not know the main cause of their delay, and was rapidly growing desperate enough to turn and face his determined pursuer.

Karl got in the first shot.

The big brute staggered and came to a stop, but it usually takes more than one piece of lead to wind up the career of a full-grown grizzly, or Mountain Charley, as the miners call them. So, recovering, he once more started on the jump after the trapper.

This time it was Cuthbert who drew a bead on the shaggy brute and sent in his compliments.

Apparently his shot counted, for the beast rolled over among the rocks, though immediately on his feet again, such is the tenacity of life and grim purpose characteristic of the terrible grizzly.

Old Sile's turn had come.

Though short of breath and panting, he whirled around in his tracks and covered his once more advancing enemy.

The bear's former rush was now hardly more than a stumble, inspired by hatred, but, all the same, he was still a dangerous enemy, whom no sane man would wish to tackle.

It seemed as though the three guns all spoke at once, so closely were the reports blended.

This time, when Bruin went down, he failed to get up again, and Old Sile was at liberty to draw a good long breath.

"Wall, I declar to Moses, that was a hot stampede,

an' no mistake. Thought he had a cinch, didn't he, boys? But whar be the other chaps as came out?"

No one had noticed in the excitement of the moment that the other bears had made off up the gully.

Karl and Cuthbert jumped down beside Sile, who led the way on the run, over rocks and scrub and numerous obstacles, eager to get a glimpse of the fleeing animals.

They were successful in overhauling one of the rascals, and, finding himself discovered, Bruin turned at bay, rushing at them with open jaws and all the evidences of rage.

This time Old Sile stood firm.

"Take time, boys. Let him get purty close, and plant the lead whar it counts," was his steady admonition.

It gave them the required nerve, and, consequently, they did themselves credit.

Had they failed, the old man stood ready to pot the bear before he could get close enough to do mischief. But long experience with wild steers had given the boys at least a fair command over their impulses, and, consequently, when they fired it was with fatal effect.

Victory had perched upon their banner.

Two bears in one morning was surely glory enough to satisfy any heart.

They walked back to look at the big one.

Karl and his chum were surprised to find it was a female, though Old Sile had had reason to suspect this fact from the ferocity shown.

"Here's somethin' quite out o' the ordinary run," he said, presently; "this bar's got cubs in the cave yonder. Don't know as I ever met with such a case at this late time o' year, when usually they're goin' into winter quarters."

The boys showed deep interest at once.

"Gee whiz! Wonder if we can't get 'em, and have 'em for pets," said Cuthbert, eagerly.

Karl nodded.

"Always thought I'd like to have a couple of bear cubs. It's such fun watching them play," he remarked.

"All right, fellers. I'll see if I can't accommodate ye," laughed Sile.

So he crawled straight into the hole.

Cuthbert thought it was very reckless of the veteran, since how was he to know but what even a fourth bear might be in hiding there, ready to rush upon an intruder.

When he looked at the dead monster, and contemplated those terribly-long claws, he shuddered at the bare thought of coming to close quarters with such an antagonist.

The trapper knew what he was doing, however, and made sure to carry his rifle along, as well as a rope, the other end of which Karl had in his possession.

The two boys waited.

Listening, they could hear a scratching noise as Old Sile made his way along the passage. Once he sneezed, under the influence of the pungent smoke that still filled the interior.

Then came the sound of a scuffle that kept their interest keyed up to the top notch and their fingers on the triggers of their guns, for the sudden advent of the furious old grizzly, flinging the burning brands to right and left, had made a tremendous impression on their minds, and they seemed to have a half fear lest this paralyzing scene might be duplicated.

What was that Old Sile was roaring? Did he call for help, and must they, too, crawl straight into the black aperture?

"Pull away!" came distinctly from within.

Ah! that was entirely different. It meant that Sile had succeeded.

Karl began to take in rope, but whatever was at the other end, it held back with such pertinacity that Cuthbert had also to lay hold in order to "snake" the little brute along.

"We'll need a snubbing-post yet," laughed Karl, as they found it necessary to exert their full strength in order to drag the rebellious captive toward the light of day.

At length he appeared in view, a little bundle of hairy pugnacity, and ere they could secure him, several scratches had been received.

"Oho!" cried Cuthbert, sucking at his hand, where the marks of four claws showed. "It's very evident you'll have to be taught manners, I see, and have your nails clipped in the bargain."

"He's a regular jim-dandy," declared the other.

Karl volunteered to go in with the rope. In truth, he wanted to see what the cleft in the wall looked like.

So he took a burning fagot and crawled along, with Cuthbert at his heels, the cub having been made secure, so that it might not decamp during their absence.

Presently they came into the cave proper, where Old Sile was found, with the other cub growling at him.

A split in the rock overhead allowed some measure of light to enter, but, after all, Karl's torch proved well adapted to bringing out those corners which they might never have examined without its assistance.

Taken in all, it was not such a place as one would care to remain in longer than was absolutely necessary. The wild animal odor was peculiarly strong, and reminded Cuthbert of the menagerie in Central Park, New York.

Bones were scattered in profusion about the place, proving that Madam Bruin had been, at least, a good pro-

vider for her interesting family, although the older brood had doubtless arrived at a self-supporting age.

The remaining cub was surrounded and tumbled over in a jiffy. He made quite a stiff fight, but numbers prevailed, and in the end he was hobbled in such a way as to be helpless, when he was yanked out of the cavern in short order.

As the hunt had been so brilliant a success, they determined to attend to what had been secured and go no further up the coulie.

The cubs were carried home, and Cuthbert spent the remainder of the day building quarters for them in a hole close by their own dugout.

Karl assisted their captain in removing the skins of the two dead grizzlies, which, when properly cured, would be glorious trophies of the day's adventure.

For a long time to come the boys would find much cause for secret merriment in their recollection of the ludicrous figure Old Sile cut as he scrambled over the ground, with Madam Eph in hot pursuit, all the time the hunted hunter bellowing lustily for them to blaze away before he fell into the toils.

Their tardiness in coming to the rescue was a conundrum to the veteran until Karl explained and showed how he had been in line most of the time, preventing their firing.

While they worked over the big bear, Karl could hear the old man chuckling to himself quite frequently, and he imagined Sile was amused at the remembrance of what consternation had accompanied the sudden rush of the enraged brute, and how he himself had gone to the floor so neatly.

When he examined the terrible claws which went with the hide, Karl was more than ever determined never to

come into close quarters with such a beast, if it could in any way be avoided.

When the day came to an end Cuthbert had fitted a strong door to the little den, and also connected it with the cave at the rear of their own dugout.

The others surveyed his work and united in declaring it a fine job.

Old Sile showed them how to feed the cubs.

Already they were growing to some extent accustomed to the presence of human beings, and their growls were less fierce.

The veteran had brought up cubs before now, and knew all about their habits.

After supper they tied one of the fat little bundles of claws and pugnacity in such a way as to prevent his doing damage, and then Sile cut his nails, blunting them effectually.

When released he huddled in a corner, sucking his paws, while the second underwent similar treatment, being rendered fairly harmless without much injury.

In time, no doubt, they would help to pass away many a dull evening with their antics.

Cuthbert was given the naming of them, and after due deliberations he said they should be known among men as Rags and Tatters.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW KARL GOT HIS ELK.

The Paradise Camp outfit had now settled down to business.

Each and every day had its duties, as well as pleasures.

The round of the traps had to be made as regularly as clockwork.

This was something Old Sile was very conscientious about, for he would not torture an animal any longer than was absolutely necessary.

Besides, it sometimes happened that, if left too long, a fox or other captive would gnaw itself free by leaving the imprisoned foot in the trap.

Then there were various side hunts to be taken. Old Sile had many places which he wished them to see while the decent weather held out.

It was really surprising how long winter kept away in this year.

Perhaps it boded no good, and Old Sile predicted that it would certainly be all the more severe when it did descend upon them, and that, therefore, they must make hay while the sun shone.

It fell to Karl's lot to meet with an adventure one day which he was not very apt to forget in a hurry.

His turn had come to secure fresh meat, while the others looked after the routine of work.

Karl started out bright and early.

The day opened with a red sunrise, and Old Sile, weatherwise like most of his kind, did not like the looks of things.

He shook his head solemnly.

"I declar to Moses I believe she's a-comin' to-day, boys—the norther we've been expectin' so long. It's in the air," he said, firmly.

Even Cuthbert could detect an unusual rawness in the atmosphere that reminded him of a bleak, wintry day when he had been ducking along the Maryland seashore.

All of them were wise enough to provide themselves against a sudden cold snap, and at Old Sile's advice Karl took along in his pocket a pair of woolen gloves and a worsted skating cap or toque, used by snowshoe clubs in Canada.

With a boy's freedom from care, no doubt he smiled at the idea of lugging such things through the woods when his own exertions would keep him warm.

But it would not be many hours ere he would loudly bless this "old womanly" caution of the ancient trapper, and call down benedictions on his hoary head.

Karl had made up his mind that this was the day for a lordly elk.

He had said nothing about it, perhaps fearing lest Old Sile might offer some objection to his going so far from camp when the weather looked unpropitious.

The captain, a day or two previous, had reported seeing signs of elk in the region of Fallen Timbers, a spot where a furious cyclone had dipped down to the earth years before and leveled an acre of the forest, the trees having been torn and twisted in a curious fashion.

Karl headed for this quarter.

To reach it he must cover several miles of pretty rough territory.

And this might only be a beginning, for, should he strike a fresh elk trail, it would very likely lead him deep into the wilderness.

Tramping along toward his destination, Karl could not

but notice how singularly quiet the wood folks were this morning.

Beyond a glimpse of a skulking Reynard and the flapping of a great Northern owl, he saw no evidence of animated life.

In the upper branches of the tallest pines the wind soughed and moaned dismally, as though in warning.

As the young Nimrod drew nearer the belt of fallen timber he became more and more on the alert for signs of noble quarry.

In imagination he pictured his sensations when showing the horns of a gigantic elk to the admiring Cuthbert, and relating how he had still-hunted the king of the Northwestern forest.

Long before his day such lofty desires as this had lured many a bold hunter into danger, perhaps to death.

What Old Sile had told him concerning the hunting of elk had burned in his brain ever since, so that it had really become something of a mania with him to kill one of the lordly animals.

Perhaps after this experience had become a thing of the past, Karl might find his ambition in this respect snuffed out.

He searched the spot well.

Old tracks there were in plenty, and Karl's life as a cowboy had long since made him more than an average trailer. He knew most of the signs whereby a hunter can tell all about the spoor of his quarry, how long ago the tracks were made, whether the animal was alarmed when passing, or moving at its natural gait, and such questions bearing upon the point at issue.

Apparently the vicinity of the wrecked forest was a favorite spot for elk, to judge from the number of tracks he ran across.

Why they came here in particular he could not say;

perhaps the grass was more tender or sweeter than in other places. He remembered hearing Old Sile make mention of a salt lick somewhere in this section, and deer of all kinds will travel many miles to satisfy their craving for salt.

It was a little before noon that Karl suddenly ran upon fresh spoor.

The sight electrified him more than he was willing to admit, for, having been educated upon the plains, Karl was an experienced hunter, and supposed he might be above any such greenhorn feeling as giving way to excitement.

He munched at his lunch as he went along, not wishing to lose time.

So an hour passed.

The air was even keener and more penetrating than at daylight.

Moreover, the last vestige of blue had vanished overhead, and where he could see the canopy through small openings, it presented only a dull-gray aspect, anything but reassuring.

A few snowflakes drifted lazily down.

Now, ordinarily, Karl was a level-headed young chap, far above the average, and, considering the conditions surrounding him, he should have given up his quest for the day and struck a bee line for camp.

Alas! the fever of conquest was in his veins.

The trail grew fresh, and from certain indications he was positive that the game could not be far ahead.

At any moment now he expected to catch a glimpse of the big beast and have his chance.

Besides, Karl actually thought he was moving in the direction of camp, when, truth to tell, it was almost in the opposite quarter, so that, although he did not even

dream of such a thing, he was already shaky in his bearings.

Faster fell the fugitive snowflakes.

Old Sile had been correct. A severe storm was imminent, winter coming at last, with a grand hurrah and flourish of trumpets.

What sound was that ahead?

To the cowboy's trained ear it was very like the familiar snort of a horse.

He fairly crept along, his nerves strained to the utmost, his eyes keenly on the alert for the first sign of his royal game.

What mattered it to him in this supreme moment that the wind whistled more vigorously through the trees and the ground actually began to be whitened with the first snow of the season?

His vigilance had its reward.

Through the half-darkened forest he suddenly caught sight of a moving object.

It was the elk.

He looked an enormous size. Perhaps it was due to some peculiarity in the atmospheric conditions, or possibly the boy's eyes and imagination played him false.

The animal presented a fair mark, though the falling snow was apt to get into the eyes of the hunter and deceive him more or less.

At any rate, here was his chance, and he did not mean to let it slip.

Down he went on one knee, and along the barrel of his Winchester he glanced until the sight covered the spot he aimed to strike.

Then the trigger was pressed without the least particle of flinching, and the report sounded.

Karl sprang up with a shout, for he had seen the big elk go crashing to earth.

He gave a second cowboy whoop, which was, however, suddenly cut short, for, to his amazement, the stricken beast gained its feet and made a headlong dash.

Instead of turning away and seeking safety in flight, the elk made straight at him.

Then he remembered all about this peculiarity in the forest monarch, remembering Old Sile's warning and the story of how he had been so hotly pressed by one of the lordly tribe at the time the swinging grapevine served him such a good trick.

The wounded beast recognized in the young hunter the cause of his sudden pain and downfall, and, furious with rage, charged directly for the spot where Karl stood. His triumphant shout and the swinging of his hat had betrayed him, and he must now nerve himself to take the consequence of his folly.

Conditions differed with regard to his situation and that of Old Sile.

The latter had exhausted his resources with that one shot, whereas Karl had half a dozen more in the magazine of his gun.

There was not a second to lose.

That old chap covered the ground with a nimbleness that was astonishing when one considered the fact of his being wounded more or less severely.

So Karl pumped another cartridge into the chamber of his weapon.

It was no easy thing to make a center shot now, with the target plunging head on toward him, and though he fired point blank, Karl was afraid he had missed.

At least, his lead did not cause the elk to slacken his mad speed one iota.

So close was he now that there was not time for another shot, with its accompanying manœuvres.

Karl had no desire to encounter those wide-spreading

and cruel-looking antlers, which seemed eager to gore him to the ground and beat his young life out then and there.

He sprang behind a tree.

At such a time it is worth something for the beleaguered hunter to keep his wits about him, and while Karl might be hard pressed, he knew how to retain his presence of mind.

The defeat of his purpose seemed only to madden the big quadruped still more.

Recovering from his fruitless onslaught, he set to chasing the lad around the tree.

Now Karl was ordinarily a good sprinter, and the close proximity of those horns to his heels gave him additional impetus, so that he slipped around that tree in a mighty lively fashion. He had the smaller circle, which made it all the easier for him.

When this remarkable game of tag had been kept up for several minutes, so that the two participants were actually wearing a track along their respective orbits, Karl found that he was growing dizzy.

It is no pleasant task to go round and round in the same small circle, especially with a pair of avenging antlers at one's heels.

Perhaps the elk experienced something of the same sensation.

At any rate, he suddenly changed his tactics, as though determined that if he could not win one way, he might try another.

Now he charged first on one side and then on the other, keeping Karl on the watch, lest he be caught napping.

Karl was now given an occasional opportunity to cast a quick glance around him.

This showed him an opportunity to better his condition.

Close by grew twin pines, the space between being just large enough to allow him to slip easily through, while the elk would be debarred from doing the same by his horns.

Watching his chance, Karl sprang to another tree, and when the right time came, changed his quarters again, this time reaching the twin pines, where he intended making his last stand.

It was easier work than before, eluding the rushes of his determined foe.

All he had to do was to slip through, while the elk was compelled to go around.

Karl felt satisfied.

He knew the game was in his hands, for he had held on to the rifle through all.

Strange to say, he experienced some little compunction about shooting the elk now.

By all rights he should have been eager to down the big beast, after having experienced such a narrow escape; but it was this very valiant spirit shown by his antlered foe that aroused the boy's love of fair play and ardent admiration, and, had the elk chosen to trot off, the chances are that Karl would have waved his hat after him and given him a parting cheer.

But there seemed no other course for him to pursue save to shoot the big fellow, since some accident might deliver him to the tender mercies of the beast.

And, besides, the snow was falling heavily, and he had no desire for keeping up this game of tag indefinitely.

Accordingly he prepared for the execution, which did not take much time, since all he had to do was to force the old shell out and place a new one in the chamber of his gun.

He calculated that three bullets were quite enough to

spend upon even such royal game, and was, therefore, determined to make this one do the business.

When his chance came he dropped the elk in his tracks with a bullet that must have severed his brave old heart. Karl heaved a sigh of relief.

He stood over his fallen enemy with feelings of sincere respect.

The game old chap had made such a gallant fight that Karl hardly felt like giving the shout of victory now. He had a peculiar fancy to the effect that he had taken advantage of the animal in some way.

Well, what was to be done?

Here he had his quarry, but a long distance separated him from camp.

Should he leave hide and flesh to the mercy of the timber wolves?

That went against his grain somehow.

So out came his knife, and he set to work, while the storm began to gather force and howl through the trees like a pack of demons.

Once Karl raised his head and listened.

That was the howl of a wolf, surely.

The keen-scented beasts had apparently already located the booty, and were gathering.

In time he had made a package of what meat he meant to carry to camp, and hung up more in the hide.

The horns he would secure after the prowlers of the woods had picked them clean, if he could again find the twin pines with Old Sile's help. Now he was ready for the return.

It was time.

When Karl looked around him and saw what progress the storm had made in the last hour, he began to have some uneasiness.

Already several inches of snow lay on the ground, and

the wind was constantly growing more bitter in its keen edge.

He was glad to utilize the woolen toque so as to cover his ears, and don the warm gloves to restore the circulation in his already benumbed hands.

The next thing was to get his bearings.

He had a pretty firm faith in his knowledge of the direction which he must take in order to regain Paradise Camp, and started off with a strong conviction that he was right.

For an hour he buffeted the storm, and then, with not a familiar landmark looming up, the first twinge of alarm possessed him.

Could it be possible he had made a blunder, after all, and that he was not heading in the proper direction.

He pulled himself together, mapped out the adjacent country in his mind, decided what quarter the storm must come from, and where the camp should be located, and then, with renewed hope, once more pushed on.

Somehow he was irresistibly reminded of the great blizzard that had descended upon Cuthbert and himself while buffalo hunting, on the occasion when, by good luck, they were enabled to save the life of Little Buckshot, the son of a Sioux chief, and make a warm friend out of one who had heretofore been a bitter enemy.

Karl hoped this would be nothing like that occasion, for a man stood a good chance of freezing exposed to such bitter cold.

When a second hour had passed he knew he was really and truly lost.

This fact did not frighten the lad. He was too accustomed to depending upon his own resources to allow such a feeling to gain the mastery over him.

What of it?

He could make a camp, after a fashion, and weather the storm somehow.

Meat he had in plenty, if only he could manage to start a fire.

How he wished he was in some ravine, like that where the bears' den lay. Many a snug hiding-place could be found there, in which he might secure shelter, build a fire and make himself genuinely comfortable.

Instead there stretched around him only the great pine woods. He seemed to have reached a flat section of country, which was totally unfamiliar to him. On every hand the prospect was the same interminable timber, swaying in the fierce gale, with a shroud of snow shutting off the vista like a gauzy curtain.

Besides, the day was almost done.

The coming of night would make matters decidedly worse for any one lost in this storm-swept region.

Karl was well aware of the fact.

Another thing gave him some concern.

He had heard the howl of mountain wolves, now near, anon more distant. For some time this had been going on steadily, until the boy realized that these sounds were really signals.

What was even more significant, they certainly increased in number, and the animals began to grow bolder with the coming of twilight.

Several times he had seen dusky, indistinct, shadowy figures gallop past, and caught the gleam of savage eyes fastened upon him.

As he stood there making up his mind to abandon all efforts to find the camp for the present, and devote his whole energies to the task of securing himself against discomfort while the storm lasted, lo and behold! the most impudent of wolves trotted into view and sat on his

haunches like a great dog, licking his chops in anticipation of a feast.

That was too much for Karl.

He threw his gun to his shoulder.

The action alarmed the wolf, and he made a move as though to withdraw, but the cowboy served a subpœna upon him, and wound up his freebooter career right then and there.

That was one, but there were others, plenty of them, for his death yelp was answered from a dozen quarters.

"By the horn spoon, I believe they're closing in on me. Between wolves and storm, I'm promised a hustling night. That was a good, husky chap, and there are more like him coming. Guess I'll keep my magazine chock full, for I'll need every shot before I'm through with these pesky pirates, as Old Sile calls 'em."

Although he now went on, it was not with the intention of searching for the dugout. A place of refuge was what he sought. It might be a hollow pine, sufficient to protect him from the storm while he made a fire on the other side, or, possibly, the upturned roots of some great forest monarch, thrown down in a recent tornado.

Surely some place must be found that would answer his requirements.

It would have to come very soon.

The night and the wolves were both closing in around him very fast.

Several times he saw the dusky figures skulking past, and once his gun spoke, with the result of much yelping as the damaged animal limped off through the woods, followed by a troop of eager pursuers, under whose fierce onslaught the wounded brute would speedily be hacked to pieces.

At last Karl sighted what he desired, a tree torn up

by the roots, the latter presenting a broadside face to the storm.

There, behind this shelter, he could make his camp, and keep lone vigil until the storm wound up its career. Being the first of the season, he did not fancy it would have a long life; indeed, they might even enjoy some fairly decent weather before grim winter set in with full vigor.

Just before he reached the intended fort there was a rush behind and something heavy landed on his back.

So sudden and unexpected was the assault that Karl was thrown over into the snow.

He scrambled to his feet instantly, still clutching his gun, and, even in this short time, he had guessed the truth, and that the assault had been made by a daring wolf, intent upon carrying off the pack of meat which Karl carried on his back.

Sure enough, it was gone.

Karl uttered a cry of consternation. He could discern the thief, making off as best he was able with the deer-skin-bound pack in his mouth, while from several quarters dusky figures bounded to intercept the successful marauder.

Karl raised his gun and fired, at the same time giving vent to a series of shrill shouts as he ran forward to where his quarry flopped about in the snow.

CHAPTER V.

THE GRAY TERROR IN THE PINE.

Taken as a whole, it was a pretty close shave.

Had the daring marauder been given even half a minute more of time, he must have carried the precious pack so far away that even fleet-footed Karl, using his best efforts, might not have been able to rescue it ere the rest of the robbers swooped hungrily down and tore it open, dividing the contents among them.

As it was, Karl had an even chance with the onrushing pack.

Another thing was in his favor: The wolves were handicapped by the fact that they could not open hostilities until they had reached close quarters, while his gun gave him the advantage of speaking at a distance.

Seeing how very determined the brutes were, Karl realized that he would have to teach them a salutary lesson.

Accordingly he let fly a few shots, so well directed that they caused considerable damage to the four-footed pirates, several limping away wounded, while the rest scampered off in hot haste.

The boy stopped over his precious pack only long enough to render his Winchester fully serviceable again.

Then he sought the upturned tree and proceeded to make ready for the long and dreary vigil that was before him.

Wood was fairly plentiful, but the lack of an axe made his labor doubly difficult.

To one of Karl's prairie education it was no serious business to light a fire, even under such disadvantages.

How cheery the first blaze seemed, amid the falling snow!

The upturned roots of the overthrown forest giant served to protect the fire in a measure.

Karl had no time just then to admire his handiwork; it was essentially important that he lay in as bountiful a supply of wood as possible ere the snow covered everything up. Even his last salutary lesson had not taught his four-footed enemies discretion.

They still hung around, and their long-drawn, melancholy howls seemed in fitting symphony with the shriek of the icy blast as it swept through the pine woods.

As long as Karl worked he had no trouble about keeping warm.

And the pile of wood began to assume respectable proportions, too.

This last fact gave him a grim satisfaction.

Now he could sit down in a niche he had located, almost free from snow, and contemplate his handiwork.

A fire is always a welcome guest to the weary, hungry pilgrim in the wilderness, and doubly so when the piercing wind swoops down from the regions of snow and ice, while desperate wild beasts sing of their hungry condition all around his camp.

That reminded Karl of the fact that he had only eaten some biscuit as a lunch.

The opportunity was at hand to appease his appetite, as well as lighten his load.

He had his knife out in a jiffy, cut off several pieces of elk meat, and, fastening them to the ends of long splinters of wood, arranged the crude toasting-forks so that the miniature steaks received the benefit of the heat without being too badly scorched.

Doubtless it was very primitive, but, all the same, in a short space of time a most delightful and appetizing

aroma began to distribute itself around the immediate neighborhood.

If it was tempting to Karl, who expected to enjoy the preparing supper, how aggravating it must have been to those hungry beasts chancing to float past to leeward of the fire, without any hope of participating in the feast? He fancied their howls were more mournful than before, if such could be possible.

It was very pleasant sitting there with his back up against the solid wall formed by those upturned roots, his feet stretched out toward the fire.

Karl was thankful, indeed.

It might have been so much worse. He knew of many instances where cattlemen had been lost in blizzards and frozen to death.

The only thing that gave him concern was the possibility of his not being able to keep up a fire all night. With such a fierce wind blowing, fuel was bound to be eaten up very rapidly, and ten hours is a long stretch.

As a last resort, he might climb into a tree, but there he would be in danger of frostbite, though safe from wolves.

He determined to use his fuel as sparingly as possible, in order to stretch it out.

The fire was built close to a tall pine that seemed partly dead, and in course of time this might blaze up, giving him a gigantic torch to brighten the dark and dreary hours.

Karl mused as he sat there toasting his shins.

It was essential that he keep awake, for any slackening of his vigil might prove disastrous in more ways than one. If the fire burned out he would not only be exposed to the attacks of those night prowlers, but at the same time to the biting frost.

He could look back to many events in his past, occa-

sions when the chances seemed even more desperate than they were just now.

Still, he had always managed to pull through, thanks to the favor of fortune and his own indomitable courage and perseverance.

This fact kept him from allowing anything like despair to creep into his heart.

Ere many hours had passed he expected to be laughing with his two comrades over the events of the night.

It is hard to crush such buoyant spirits.

The world looks bright through youthful eyes.

As time passed on Karl realized that his greatest struggle was to be with himself.

It was very difficult to keep awake.

The heat of the fire in front, coupled with the sharp air around him, contributed to a sense of drowsiness such as he had seldom known.

Many times he jumped up and made a search for more wood, shouting a little to still more arouse his faculties.

The hoarse voices of the storm and the howling of wolves answered his challenge.

Karl made up his mind that those skulking brutes intended keeping him company all through the watches of the night.

At least the consciousness of danger, which their presence suggested, might assist him in combating the temptations of sleep.

It was about midnight, he judged.

Six more long hours.

How could he endure it?

There are few agonies more intense than this awful struggle to keep awake when the faculties are dead for sleep.

Many a young soldier has suffered worse under such conditions than when facing the bullets of the enemy.

Karl many times came near losing his grip upon the situation.

Frequently he would arouse himself with a sudden desperate start, and for a brief time appear to be fully on the alert, only to gradually sink back again to the dangerous stage when the busy brain grows confused and the whole muscular system is in the grip of a giant.

There came a time when Karl was aroused with something of a rude shock.

In leaning back, his elbow by mere chance rested upon the package of elk meat, which he had placed on his left side.

This suddenly was snatched away, causing him to almost fall over.

It was no accident.

Karl, fully aroused, snatched up his gun.

As he turned to that quarter, he was just in time to see a shadowy form making off through the swiftly-falling snow, which already had reached such a depth in some places that it was apt to retard the progress of an animal laden down with spoils.

Karl knew his breakfast was in danger, and he made almost ludicrous haste to scramble to his feet and give chase.

In spite of his activity he would have made a mess out of floundering through the snow in pursuit of the thief, only for the fact of his possessing a gun.

So uncertain was the light that it required two shots to bring the beast down, and when Karl reached the spot he was met by a snapping pair of white teeth and eyes that glowed hot hate, so that it was necessary for him to club the wolf over the head with his gun ere he could lay hands on his precious packet.

Well, this was a great adventure, after all, one he might not soon forget.

Nor was the end yet at hand.

Warned by this experience, he thought it might be a good idea to divide the packet into two parts.

One of these he secreted under the roots of the fallen tree just behind him.

The other he tied among the branches of a neighboring pine, fully ten feet from the ground, confident that the sturdiest old gray wolf in the whole Northwest could not touch this treasure trove, no matter how great his cunning.

Thus another hour or so had passed.

Time was wearing away.

It would be a blessed sight when dawn crept through the snow-covered forest.

One thing gave Karl deep satisfaction—the storm, while fierce during its stay, was already broken, the wind had died down, the snow ceased to fall heavily, and by morning perhaps the clouds would break.

He hoped so, at least, for he had a serious task before him, locating the dugout.

It was still very cold.

He might perish if deprived of the fire.

And the stock of available fuel was dwindling to a minimum, it appeared.

Again Karl skirmished for more fuel with some little success.

To pass the time away, he cooked another mess of elk steak, and this, with the disposal of the same, consumed about another hour.

Then time began to drag again.

It was worse than before.

No danger of Karl forgetting this experience in a hurry—each minute was impressed indelibly on his mind by the acute suffering he endured.

While he sat there fighting the demands of nature, he

was suddenly conscious of some movement in the pine tree where he had fastened half of his spoils.

At first, in his half-asleep condition, he thought a puff of wind had blown one of the branches, and the movement had chanced to catch his eye.

The fire was rather low just then, it being his policy to not drive it any more than he could help, and Karl was just dismissing the thing from his mind, when he discovered a singular fact that sent an electric thrill through him.

There was no sign of drowsiness about the cowboy now, all of his faculties were keenly on the alert, for danger menaced his camp.

There among the dense branches of the pine he had seen two great, greenish-yellow eyes glare out with a phosphorescent glow.

He winked violently, wondering whether this might not be an optical delusion of some sort; but when he looked again the same fierce eyes glared into his own.

It was positively a fact then, some animal was in the pine.

That miserable elk meat had already given him a tremendous amount of trouble, and the end did not seem to be yet in sight.

Karl's hand had unconsciously dropped down on his gun even while he stared, and this faithful friend once on duty gave him a feeling of greater reliance.

How could a wolf have managed to get up there?

Really, these animals were the most determined as well as wonderful he had ever known. The prairie wolves with which he had always been familiar could never dream of climbing into the branches of a pine tree, no matter how desperately hunger might appeal to their ambition.

By the way, who said it was a wolf?

"There was nothing left for Karl to do but to fling up his gun and down the old chap, with a centre shot, as neatly done as old Sile would have wished." See page 132.

He must not take it for granted that there were no other wild animals in the Big Horn region fond of fresh elk meat.

There was the Canada lynx, for instance, that Old Sile had knocked over in the camp on their first arrival.

Karl remembered what a lusty and fierce-looking chap he had been, and how the old guide had elaborated upon the necessity of shooting to kill when dealing with one of this aggressive type, lest the game at close quarters result in the hunter having his garments, perhaps his skin, torn into ribbons by the teeth and claws with which a bountiful nature had armed the tassel-eared cat.

Karl looked intently.

He could see the shadowy outlines of the beast, as he squatted upon the limb just above the coveted package of meat.

The fire at intervals had been starting up into a flame which, lasting a minute or so, would again die out, leaving a state of half gloom.

Karl could, with the toe of his moccasin, touch some of the half-burned pieces of wood, giving them a shove toward the center.

Thus it might be expected that in a brief space of time there would be something of an illumination around that section.

When he made this move, he heard a low but expressive growl from above, as though such action displeased his lordship.

Somehow, Karl thought this was rushing matters, to show such a spirit when the other was an unwelcome guest.

Perhaps he was awaiting an invitation to come down from his perch.

Karl was ready for business.

Besides holding his gun in a position for immediate

use, he managed to draw himself up in a bunch, so that in an emergency he could either jump or roll aside.

Sometimes the dying leap of a wild cat is a desperate thing indeed, and old hunters have always avoided the contact when possible.

There was no sleep in Karl's eyes now; indeed, he had never been more wide-awake in the whole course of his life.

Thus he waited for the moment to come when the blaze would spring up and give him the illumination he needed in order to make his shot tell.

His eyes still being fastened upon that indistinct mass aloft, and growing more accustomed to the semi-gloom, he was suddenly made conscious of its size.

Old Sile had declared the lynx killed in camp to have been of unusual dimensions. Just wait until he saw this fellow!

"He's a hummer," thought Karl.

Indeed, the beast looked twice the length of that same lynx.

But what was that moving with a jerky side action back of the crouching brute?

Ah! the fire began to catch—already there was a crackling, and little tongues of flame shot up.

The darkness must soon vanish.

And as he looked, Karl saw that the moving object was a long, supple tail. How often had he seen a domestic cat thus crouch and, while watching her intended prey, ready for a jump, move her tail to and fro in this spasmodic fashion.

But—what was this?—no wild cat was ever known to sport a tail—could he be facing some remarkable new breed, or——

The fire all at once boomed up and cheerily took hold upon the fresh fuel.

Karl's eager eyes saw a long, gray body, at one end of which was the jerking tail, while the other was adorned with a square, determined-looking head, now resting upon the animal's forepaws, while the wicked eyes were fastened hungrily upon the crouching lad below.

Karl knew all now.

This was no common bobcat, or even a more dangerous Canada lynx, but the craftiest animal of the wilderness, and, next to the great grizzly bear, the one to be most feared—a royal American panther, cousin to the Mexican puma and the Amazonian jaguar.

Phew! this was rather crowding the mourners, Karl thought. He had already gone through a series of adventures that seemed quite sufficient for one night, and now this thing was to cap the climax.

Karl had never killed a panther, though taking part in several hunts where a victim was brought down by others.

He was not quite sure just now whether he ever aspired to such glory, especially under the conditions that governed the present case.

If the beast would become alarmed on account of the fire and go quietly away, Karl stood ready to wish him a hearty farewell, and crush down any covetous desire for his sleek, gray hide, which was very generous on the part of the young Nimrod, to be sure.

The panther, however, gave not the slightest indication, on his part, savoring of retreat.

Doubtless he was hungry.

The odor of the fresh meat so close at hand tantalized the beast.

Besides, he was not in the habit of allowing himself to be discouraged by trifles.

He had no love for fire, and would have to be pretty desperate to spring at Karl, with that blaze between,

but there is no accounting for the actions of such creatures.

Karl saw him settling his haunches on the limb behind.

He had watched cats do exactly the same thing, when making ready to leap upon mouse or bird, and the conviction seized him that the panther meant to spring.

There was only one thing to do under the circumstances, since he could never hope to hit the beast once he left the limb of the pine, and this was to let him have it.

Accordingly Karl's cheek pressed the stock of his Winchester.

It was dubious work, taking such risks with a poor light, but there was no choice.

The lad was remarkably cool and self-possessed, considering his position, and his hand did not tremble in the least as he covered the beast as well as the latter's position would allow.

It was a delicate thing to shoot and then get out of the way of the animal's leap.

Yet Karl managed it.

He did not take the time to spring erect, but simply threw himself to one side, rolling over in the snow like a log, all the while maintaining that desperate grip on his shooting-iron.

The owner of the sleek, gray coat sprang all right enough, but miscalculated the distance, which, considering the fact of his having a bullet landed in his foreshoulder, splintering the bone and playing great havoc, was not at all to be wondered at.

Falling just five feet short of where he had figured to alight, he came fairly and squarely down in the middle of Karl's precious fire.

The way half-burned and blazing fagots flew just then was a caution.

The piercing scream of the wounded and scorched beast rang through the misty aisles of the great pine forest until one might have thought some maddened creature from the lower regions had broken from confinement and raged over the earth seeking victims.

Karl knew what had happened even before he scrambled upon his knees and saw the fireworks.

He also felt sure that as soon as the singed beast got his bearings, and discovered where his hated human foe had dodged, he would be after him like a hurricane.

So Karl depended once more on his gun.

It was not the easiest thing in the world to cover the gyrating, frenzied beast, but Karl was quick of eye, and presently he found the opportunity for which his heart yearned.

This time there was no escape from the foreclosure of the mortgage, and he had the satisfaction of seeing the panther spring into the air, try to climb an adjacent pine, cling there in the convulsive throes of dissolution, and then, as his hitherto unterrified head sank, his claws lost their grip and he fell upon the snow an inert mass.

A tremendous strain was taken from Karl's young shoulders with this lucky demise of the panther.

Giving way to the genuine cowboy element that had long become a part of his nature, he sprang up and burst into cheers that were fierce and loud, and must have caused more or less alarm among the wolves still hanging about and bombarding the camp with their long-drawn, melancholy howls.

Well, it was a victory worth winning.

Karl felt proud of his work as he bent over the still warm form and felt of the great muscular strength that enabled a panther to make such tremendous leaps.

Lucky indeed the lad counted himself to have escaped

an encounter at close quarters with this terrible beast, whose claws would have done awful execution.

The next thing on the programme was to resuscitate the fire and then secure the precious gray hide of the late warrior.

This would help to pass more time away.

On the whole, the night was growing old, and he promised to survive.

What a lot of things he would have to tell Cuthbert when they met again.

And Old Sile, would he compliment him on his grand victories, or chide because he lost himself in the heat of the chase?

It was about three o'clock in that dready night when the pine finally caught fire.

The blaze curled up around the tree and leaped from limb to limb until the whole fabric was alight.

Karl had no fear of setting the forest on fire, since the fall of snow entirely prevented the flames from communicating with other trees.

He sat there for two hours and watched that resinous, half-dead pine burn—there was a weird fascination about the thing, and, besides, it effectually rid the immediate neighborhood of any prowling wolves, for they fled in terror at sight of that towering column of fire.

So morning came.

Karl made another square meal.

He had figured it all out where his blunder lay, and, with the sun to guide him, started out, laden heavily with elk meat and panther skin.

In two hours his halloo was answered, and he ran across Old Sile, who surveyed him with mingled doubt and delight. He had been out pretty much all night, searching for the lost boy.

CHAPTER VI.

TROUBLE IN THE AIR.

Well, Karl was glad himself it was all over.

He had borne the burden manfully, and acquitted himself with honor, but at the same time there was a severe strain upon his nervous system which immediately relaxed as soon as his eyes fell upon the quaint and genial countenance of Old Sile.

Of course the veteran had felt some anxiety concerning the lad.

It was true that Karl knew how to take care of himself as well as any man, but to be lost in a blizzard, or even an ordinary snowstorm, is an experience that tries the best of them.

What Old Sile really feared was that the lad had been injured in some encounter with a wild beast, and might have been overtaken by the storm in this helpless condition.

He was consequently very glad to see the cowboy again, and when he discovered what manner of burden Karl carried on his back he felt like shouting.

"I declar to Moses if you ain't been and done it—elk and panther—that's high game for one day, says I," was the way the veteran expressed his feelings.

"Where's Cuthbert?" asked Karl.

"Lookin' for you in another quarter. He didn't sleep all night, I reckon."

"Well, you can just bet on it I didn't, with wolves snapping at my toes and this old gray huckleberry trying to steal my meat out of the tree."

"Let's go to him," said Old Sile, eager to hear an account of Karl's adventures.

He shouldered the burden with greatest ease, for it was plain to be seen that Karl was weary enough to drop.

Old Sile led the way straight as the crow flies. He never got lost on prairie or mountain; but this could not be said in connection with his journeyings in the haunts of men, for he had once hopelessly lost himself in the city of Chicago, and that experience set him chuckling every time he recalled it.

Cuthbert was not at the dugout.

A signal had been arranged, however, by means of which he might be informed that the lost one had turned up.

Old Sile stepped out and fired three shots in succession.

The air was as clear as a bell, and the trio of reports could have been heard an incredibly long distance away.

"Will that fetch him?" asked Karl, who had stretched himself upon his bunk, and, oh, how good it felt to his tired frame.

"If he's within two miles it will, sure."

Old Sile revived the smoldering fire, and in a wonderfully brief time the delicious odor of fine Java coffee, which Cuthbert had been very particular to secure to suit his taste, filled the interior of the dugout.

"We took mighty little time with our breakfast, an' I reckon the boy'll feel like havin' a bite. So here goes the whole hog," said Sile.

That meant fried potatoes and bacon.

Karl was ready to eat again, thanks to the keen air and his two-hour tramp.

Sleep was what he wanted more than anything on earth.

After Cuthbert came, and the story had been told, he meant to curl up there and enjoy the most delightful nap imaginable.

Indeed, it was quite a task to keep awake even so long. The warmth of the room, added to the ease and comfort of his bunk, seemed to tempt him even more than when he kept lone vigil in the snow forest, with the blazing pine as his burnt offering.

Just as Sile pronounced things done to a turn, the sound of quick, flying footsteps on the crunching snow without announced the arrival of their comrade.

Karl expected him as usual in his boisterous way to give a boyish shout or war whoop.

On the contrary, Cuthbert stood in the doorway eagerly trying to penetrate the smoky interior of the old cabin, a heart-hungry look upon his rosy face.

Karl sprang to meet him, and was surprised when he felt a pair of arms around his neck, and heard the other say, in tones husky with deep emotion:

"I'm awful glad to see you again, old fellow."

And Karl knew in that moment what a hold he had upon the warm heart of this tried and true comrade, at whose side he had gone through thick and thin these many moons.

Cuthbert had suffered keenly in mind.

He had imagined his chum in all manner of danger, and groaned because the conditions did not allow him to throw himself into the breach, as he was so ready to do.

And when Old Sile showed the elk meat, and then proudly held up the panther skin with the ferocious head still attached, as was customary, Cuthbert, speechless with admiration, could only look at his comrade with kindling eyes that spoke even more eloquently than words.

"And now squat down to breakfast afore the good victuals gits cold. When we gits the edge kinder taken off our appetites, Karl kin entertain us with the story, for I reckon he's got somethin' to tell worth hearin'."

Karl was quite willing, and sketched the skeleton of his story, telling them in a general way what had happened to him since parting from them in the morning, leaving the particulars for a second recital when his wits were brighter.

They could easily imagine many of the sensations he endured, after a skeleton of the story had been sketched.

Cuthbert drew a long breath as he heard how the panther had settled for a spring, how Karl fired and then rolled out of the way, and the tremendous splurge that followed the beast's introduction to the firebrands.

In imagination he could see it all as plainly as though he had been on the spot. What would he not have given to have been there and driven home a bullet while the beast floundered and writhed and screamed with pain!

Karl gave it up.

He crawled into the bunk again.

The murmur of his companions' voices came to his ears for a minute or so, and then he lost all consciousness of sounds.

Old Sile knew that Cuthbert was almost as worn out as the other, so he insisted upon his securing rest.

He would look after the traps whenever it was necessary.

Something Cuthbert had told him seemed to give the old ranger more or less uneasiness, and he secretly wished to see for himself.

It was noon when he sallied forth, and he hardly expected to be back before dark, but long ere that time one of the boys would have aroused, and might be depended

on to look after whatever was necessary with regard to fire and supper.

It really appeared as though everything seemed to combine on this particular day with the intention of delaying Old Sile.

Not a trap that he visited but was sprung and had to be set and baited, all of which consumed more or less time.

Two had been carried away, necessitating a search, and when found they held game which had to be knocked on the head and the skin secured.

It was a red-letter day.

He took a beaver, a badger, and a magnificent silver fox. The last aroused the enthusiasm of the veteran trapper, who well knew its great value. It was a fair pelt, with deep, glossy, bluish-black hair, and a silvery grizzle on forehead and flanks.

This was only the third Old Sile had ever captured during his many years' experience in the trapping business, proving how rare the silver fox must be.

Only queens, or the wives of trust magnates, could afford to indulge in such a luxury as a cape made from such an expensive material.

Old Sile felt good over his luck—it promised to be a red-letter season for him, unless——

There was something troubling him then.

Cuthbert had brought information that gave him more or less uneasiness.

He glanced around as he moved along in a manner that suggested suspicion.

They were not alone in this game valley of the Big Horn Mountains.

Old Sile had anticipated some annoyance from thieving Indians; but if Cuthbert was right, these were white

men, because their trail showed that they wore boots with heels.

It was hardly possible that they could be long in the region without discovering signs of our friends' presence.

What then?

Would they hang around with the intention of stealing the game from the traps?

Old Sile's jaws expressed a grim determination which the flash of his eye only seconded.

In days of yore, when he trapped in company with that prince of rangers, Kit Carson, there had been but one penalty for a miserable skunk caught red-handed in the act of lifting an honest man's hard-earned pelts out of the trap, and that had been to shoot him in his tracks.

Perhaps in these latter days one might not feel that the provocation deserved such summary punishment, but thievery of this sort always stirs up the worst elements in the nature of a trapper. To steal a horse along the border was a hanging affair, but in a civilized community it is not regarded as a crime on a par with murder.

So Sile was doubly cautious on this day.

He seemed to feel there was trouble in store for them, and that the coming of these intruders, whoever they might be, would alter the peaceful conditions that had thus far marked their possession of Paradise Valley.

Late in the afternoon he arrived in the vicinity of the spot where Cuthbert had discovered the tracks.

And the last trap he visited had been plainly robbed of its victim, a fox.

The tracks were there as plain as day.

Evidently the thieves were bold men, and did not care whether their presence were known or not.

Old Sile looked black.

His fighting blood came to the fore.

Whoever these bold rascals might be, they would find they had run up against a snag when they attempted such tactics with an old ranger of his caliber.

Long and earnestly he examined the footprints in the snow, where the spots of blood and tufts of red hair told of the stolen game.

Somehow Old Sile seemed to think he had seen those imprints before.

"It'll be a cold day fur him when he runs up agin Old Sile, if so be it's the feller I suspect," he muttered

The trap was no longer of any use in that place, now that its location was known.

So he slung it on his back.

It was in no pleasant humor that Sile started for the dugout at dusk, despite the fact that he carried on his back a prize pelt that was worth a whole season's ordinary trapping.

Meanwhile the two boys slept soundly through most of the afternoon.

Cuthbert was the first to awaken.

The fire needed attention, so he busied himself in paying heed to the wood pile, until once more a cheery blaze filled the rude hearth.

Then Karl yawned and crawled out.

"How d'ye feel?" asked his chum, anxiously.

"Pretty fair. That was a good sleep. Guess I can stand my trick at the wheel now until its regular bedtime. Sile not in yet?" with a peep from the window of the front cabin into the gathering darkness of the great pine woods.

"You see he has a long round to make in order to visit all the traps, and somehow I think he'll take more time than usual to-day."

Karl swung around on his heel quickly.

There was something in the tone of his friend that struck him as queer.

"Why to-day?" he demanded.

Cuthbert smiled at his eagerness.

"Well, we're not alone any longer."

"The dickens you say!"

"I saw tracks."

"Sure they weren't our own?"

A shrug of the shoulders.

"Indians?" asked Karl again.

"Never—they had boots with heels."

Karl digested this.

He knew full well the significance of such an event. Men who wore heeled boots were hardly honest trappers; more likely they would prove to be desperadoes, chased into the wilderness, against whom the hand of every man, red or white, was raised.

"Perhaps they're just passing through, and may not discover signs of us," he suggested, but at the same time he did not himself take much stock in such a possibility.

Deep down in his heart, a vague fear sprang into existence.

He remembered how the renegade cow-puncher Caleb Cross had entered into a conspiracy that would have done justice to a modern stage melodrama, having in view the capture and sequestration of young Cuthbert Lee, heir to a healthy fortune in Virginia, with the idea of securing ransom.

Perhaps it was foolish in him to connect that former attempt at kidnapping with the appearance of unknown men here, but there seemed to be some invisible bond between them in his mind.

"Then we must keep on our guard night and day

until they vamose the region," he said, with considerable deliberation.

"What if they choose to stay? What if they are thieves and rob our traps?"

Karl frowned.

"You remember the stories Old Sile has told us about his early days. Kit Carson shot more than one man for such an act."

"Nevertheless, I don't think I'd care to take the life of a human being, however degraded he might be, for simply helping himself to some fur," said Cuthbert, shuddering.

"What could be done, then?" asked Karl, sturdily, for he had been brought up on the prairie, and from childhood had seen the working of the prairie-man's law—"an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a man's life for stealing a horse or raiding cattle."

Naturally, then, Karl was more inclined to look upon such an offense as robbery in the light of a heinous crime, while Cuthbert, bred among civilized and refined people would not be apt to think it merited such severe punishment.

"Well," he said, slowly, "the whipping-post, or a coat of tar and feathers might redeem such a rascal, I imagine."

Karl's face relaxed.

He even laughed at the picture thus conjured up of a poor wretch covered only with nasty black tar and the contents of a feather pillow, forced to face a cold, wintry night up there in the wilderness.

"I think burning him at the stake would be little less cruel than the tar and feather business up here, for he'd freeze to death inside of ten hours."

"Well, let's hope these bad men will decamp and leave

us in peace. I wouldn't like to answer for Old Sile if he runs across them, I tell you."

"Dear Old Sile! What a blessed big heart he's got, in spite of his queer ways."

"Yes; and he'll be coming in soon."

"Cold as an iceberg."

"And hungry as—as that panther when he sat in the tree above the elk meat and refused to be looked out of countenance by you."

"Then our duty is plain."

"Let's get supper."

It was a task these two lads, always hungry, never wearied of.

The fire glowed invitingly, and the whole interior of the dugout looked cheerful indeed, especially in contrast with the cold and darkness without.

At any rate, two men who peered in through the small window could not but contrast their own forlorn condition with the cozy aspect that met their eyes within.

Unconscious of being watched, the boys pursued their culinary labor.

Presently that same subtle aroma of coffee stole through the cracks and appealed irresistibly to the appetites of the fellows without.

They seemed to thresh over an old argument once more, gestures taking the place of words to a considerable degree. One wished to intrude upon the boys immediately, while the other, more cautious, would rather hold off until they had obtained a better grasp upon the situation as to what company the lads might have, and such other facts as were connected with the case.

A compromise was at length effected. Perhaps the more the timid man snuffed at the aromatic odor emanating from the old dugout, the weaker grew his opposition.

At any rate, he yielded the game.

So quietly was the door pushed open that neither Karl nor his busy chum had any indication of the fact.

They both bent over the fire, intent upon the culinary duties that engaged their attention.

The two men drew closer.

One of them, with the swagger of a cowboy in his make-up, threw a leg over the end of the table, and looked as impudent and perfectly at home as you please.

The other, more cautious, made sure to glide over so that he would stand between the two lads and their guns, resting on pegs that were driven into the wall.

It was a peculiar scene.

The boys had about completed preparations for supper, everything was cooked, and both of them hoped Old Sile would soon be along.

Cuthbert, burning from the heat over the fire, thought he would go to the door and cool off for a few minutes while looking for the veteran.

As he turned and took one step forward his eyes fell upon the swinging leg of the bold fellow who straddled one corner of the table.

It was the biggest surprise Cuthbert had ever received in the whole course of his life. And the acutely disagreeable nature of it lay in the fact that this swaggering fellow was no stranger to the lad.

He had not forgotten Caleb Cross and his bold scheme for entrapping Cuthbert Lee, whom he might hold until a healthy ransom had been paid to deliver the lad from durance vile.

This was the same Cross.

A strange freak of chance, or perhaps some determined planning on his part had once more drifted his miserable life line across that of the young Virginian.

Cuthbert was so amazed, so taken by surprise, that for the moment he even lost control over his tongue.

The man grinned in what was doubtless intended to be an affable way.

"How d'ye do, boys?" he rasped, in his peculiar tone, that, once heard, could never be forgotten.

Karl sprang up as though touched by the poles of a galvanic battery.

He held a long spoon in his hand, with which he had been basting some meat.

That voice was very familiar to him, and he knew it presaged trouble, even before his eyes fell upon the insolent face of Caleb Cross.

The exiled cowboy, whose life upon the range could never again be resumed after what he had done, gave him the laugh.

"P'raps you remember me, little Karl. I see you do now, from your scowl. Never mind squintin' toward them guns. My friend Pepito will take care of them dangerous toys. Didn't expect to see me here, eh? Well, I've got a faculty for bobbing up serenely when I'm least expected. Pretty nicely fixed you be. This is a jim dandy of a dugout; better than any teamster or mule-skinner like Pepito here has a chance to eat in. Awful glad to see you, kids. That supper smells fine. This your table here? Excuse my occupying it—been so long since I've sat down at one, I almost forgot my manners."

He swung his leg, covered with the usual leather overalls or chaps of a cowman, from the article in question.

"Well, what d'ye want, Caleb Cross?" demanded Karl, who had now recovered from his surprise.

The fellow looked at his yellow-skinned companion and laughed harshly.

"Listen to that, Pepito; what do we want, and with that agonizing swell in the air? We've corraled the outfit, and you bet we don't pull leather till we've rounded up that gay supper over yonder. Come, get a hustle on

you, kids, and dish her up, for I'm as hungry as a wolf, I tell ye."

"So was that gent yonder," Karl said, quietly, pointing to the panther skin hanging on the wall of the shanty, his square head in plain sight.

"Eh?" grunted Cross, staring.

"But I got him all the same," concluded the youngster, grimly, meeting the fierce glance of the bad man with a look of cool defiance.

"Oh! ye did, eh? Well, you won't find it so easy to pot me, d'ye hear? I've met you before, my husky lad, and I give you fair warnin' that I'll not take any foolishness from such as you. Now git to work."

The man was plainly uneasy.

He did not exactly fancy that confident strain in Karl's defiant voice. In the parlance of the border, it sounded too much as though he had "a card up his sleeve," which, when played, would cause consternation.

Karl gave him one look.

Then, as if to obey, he turned to the fire.

The man was evidently surprised at the easy victory he had gained.

"Set here, Pepito *amigo*. Stay—bring them guns with ye, so as to keep the kids outen mischief. I'll watch the door, 'cause ye see I've got an ijee—great Jerusalem! what's that?—here, stop it, I tell you," he bellowed lustily, for Karl was deluging him with scalding water dipped with a gourd from a dishpan that rested over the fire.

CHAPTER VII.

THOSE "BAD MEN."

The free, rollicking life of a Western cowboy is very apt to make one self-assertive and independent in action.

Thrown upon their own resources so frequently in the course of their adventurous career, these Bedouins of the plains learn to think and act in the same breath, as it were.

Karl had shown this deserving trait on many a former occasion when the odds seemed about to overwhelm him.

He seemed to know just what to do in order to meet a sudden emergency, when the call for action was against him.

This rascal of a Caleb Cross was well known to him, and he had always shunned the fellow as a type with which he had no sympathy.

Cross had usually pretended to look down upon him as a "kid," though Karl was stout, and could have held his own with most range riders when it came to a thorough knowledge of those things so necessary in a cattleman.

Perhaps it was this very manliness in the youngster that irritated the fellow. His own life had been one of dissipation and sin, and the evil within his heart forced him to hate all that was good and true.

Karl was very much averse to taking life unless forced into the last ditch.

There was nothing, however, to prevent him from demoralizing the enemy with whatever means lay nearest his hand.

Water and Caleb Cross had never agreed, and therefore it became Karl's policy to stir up strife between them.

That the fluid was heated to the boiling point made the argument all the stronger.

No wonder the bully bellowed so lustily as he received dipper after dipper of the scorching liquid distributed about his person.

It burnt even through his garments, and whenever it splashed upon his face the contact was very much like that of molten lead.

He danced, he dodged, he writhed and twisted, all the time endeavoring to protect his red face from the scalding shower, and giving forth howls that would have frightened a coyote into fits.

It was a very singular spectacle, one not to be met with every day.

At least, so thought Old Sile, as he stood in the doorway and swept a pair of astonished eyes around the interior of the dugout.

Karl had gained great glory in the mind of the veteran by the manner in which he carried himself through the stirring adventure with the maddened elk and the hungry panther, but now he quite won the old ranger's heart through the heroic treatment he accorded the bad man who had invaded Paradise Camp.

Pepito, the greaser, had been too much astonished when this bombardment began to make any move looking to the assistance of his colleague.

He, too, had as decided aversion to the outward application of water, hot or cold, as Caleb, and the sight of the cowboy dealing it out in such generous doses filled him with horror.

Recalled to his senses by the cries of the beleaguered one, the Mexican endeavored to overawe the youngster, Karl, by threatening him with the weapons which he

had been carrying in his arms at the time the avalanche of hot water began.

Cuthbert had not forgotten that he had a concern in this affair.

Every one might not be in a position to deal out such generous quantities of heated water, but there was something for every willing pair of hands to do.

The cowboy instinct was strong within the Virginian, and almost unconsciously he snatched down a lariat which had hung from a wooden peg.

It was his own rope, tried and true.

Many a good cast he had made with it, and many a steer it had thrown.

Associations had rendered it precious in the eyes of the erstwhile tenderfoot, and this accounted for the presence of the lasso in this Northern wilderness, where such a thing could hardly be of service in roping the fleet-footed elk or the monstrous grizzly bear.

Since Karl seemed to claim a monopoly of the Cross outfit, Cuthbert was of necessity compelled to turn his attention to the man who came from sunny Mexico.

If he could corral him in such confined space, it would be something of a feat indeed.

He swung the shortened rope in a way that meant business, sure enough.

The fates favored him, for, naturally, the Mexican's attention was wholly taken up with the determined dispenser of hot water, whose arm seemed never to tire of dealing out dippers of his favorite fluid.

And Cuthbert, like the darling he was, rounded up his bunch in a way that did great credit to the one who had taught him the rudiments of lariat tossing.

For the yawning loop fell over the head and shoulders of the greaser, was jerked tight as it inclosed its quarry, and there the sallow-featured son of Mexico stood,

trussed up like a fowl for the spit, both arms pinioned at his sides, together with the gun he had been in the act of leveling.

It was all done in a few winks, too.

No wonder Old Sile started as he opened the door and beheld such a spectacle. No wonder a huge grin began to spread over his weather-beaten face.

He was proud of those boys, and ready to back them against the world just then.

The confusion was tremendous. It was as though a hurricane had struck Paradise Camp, and threatened to demolish it.

Karl's supply of dishwater was limited, and by this time he began to resort to threats. Every time he made a motion as if to throw, Caleb Cross would hunch himself up and endeavor to avoid displaying any portion of his cuticle that he could conveniently hide.

Cuthbert, having bagged his game, was in somewhat of a quandary as to how he might dispose of it, for should he loosen his grip on the lariat the greaser might burst loose and do bodily harm to his captor.

Plainly, then, a weapon was what he needed to possess most of all, and, in order to accomplish this, Cuthbert must run up his rope hand over hand until he reached the struggling victim, since he had *cached* all the guns they had in the shanty.

This he did while Karl kept the other fellow on the jump, desperately dodging many a sweeping feint. A burnt child dreads the fire, and if Caleb had been given an opportunity just then to declare what was the most objectionable element on the face of the whole earth, he would have unquestionably and vociferously said hot water.

When Cuthbert managed to stoop and snatch his own reliable Winchester from the hard dirt floor of the cabin

in front of the dugout he had the thrill of victory possess him.

Henceforth there were no more terrors for him in these two rascally allies by whom their peaceful camp had been invaded.

Karl, seeing how matters stood, advanced and took his own gun from the nerveless hand of the Mexican, who offered not the slightest objection. He had perhaps been known as a bad man in his time, but there was something in the astonishing and original tactics of the two youngsters that awed him.

Old Sile now made known his presence by means of a hearty guffaw.

No one had noticed him before.

The boys looked radiant when he beamed upon them so proudly.

As for Caleb Cross and his yellow-skinned pard, they hung their heads, not that sorrow for their sins had overtaken them, but on account of having to confess a disastrous defeat at the hands of such youngsters whom they sneered at as "kids."

"Wall, I declar to Moses if that ain't the greatest trick I ever seen done. Scotched a bar in camp onct myself by soakin' him with scaldin dishwater, but a human bein'! Great Scott, Caleb, no danger o' you bein' froze arter that bilin'."

Then he grew very stern, remembering the fact that in dealing with these men they were handling snakes ever ready to turn and strike a venomous blow, not to be trusted any more than a diamond-back rattler.

"I've left the door open, men. Yer company ain't desired here any longer, but before ye vamose I want to tell ye one thing. Old Sile's got a good eye—a hawk ain't no better—and I give ye my word that if I see any sign o' ye around these diggings arter to-morry I'm

a-goin' to track ye down an' shoot on sight. Now, slip while ye hev the chance."

Caleb was very uncomfortable. His flesh felt as though it might be on fire.

He subdued the passionate rebellion in his heart because he feared this gaunt old man, who had the upper hand now.

"It's a beastly cold night to turn even a dog adrift, Sile Wegg," he said.

"That's right true, but you and your pard are an insult to the meanest dog that ever walked the earth. Here you don't stay, if ye freeze to death in the forest. Men like you ain't a-goin' to give up the ghost so easy. Thar's venison for ye; now be off, find a shelter in some ravine and cook supper. Then when mornin' comes step lively, for I shall be on yer trail, ready to keep my word."

They knew he meant it.

The Mexican made a signal. He was a cautious chap, and had a desire to set eyes on his warm country again. This snow-covered wilderness of the Northwest did not please him very much, and it was a beastly country to lay one's bones in.

Caleb saw his companion pick up the piece of deer meat Silas had tossed toward them so contemptuously.

He knew this was not their hour, that luck had set in heavily against their side, and it would be folly to resist.

Besides, Caleb was a good waiter, and the scheme he had in view for snatching a big fortune through the possession of the Virginia boy would not spoil by being deferred.

Twice had he failed.

There is often luck in the third time.

Without a word, either blessing or curse, he picked up his gun and went out.

Ole Sile followed at his heels, evidently not trusting the two scamps.

The sting of their defeat, coupled with the aggravating sensation of scalded cuticle, might influence Caleb to turn when once outside the dugout and discharge his weapon with murderous intent.

Old Sile swung the shutter over the little window and closed the door.

"Turn to the left; ye'll find a ravine not half a mile away; good shelter and plenty o' firewood," he called after the shadowy figures that trudged over the snow.

Not a word came in answer.

Doubtless more than one backward glance was taken; but, although Old Sile could not be seen, they knew full well he was standing in the shadow of the trees, keeping tab of their movements.

And well did Caleb know the wonderful accuracy with which he could send a rifle bullet upon its errand.

So they melted away from his sight.

Old Sile stood there and listened until he could no longer catch the crunching sound of their footsteps in the frozen snow.

It was indeed a cold night to be out in the timber, but these worthies knew what they were about when they chose to defy the weather.

What brought them to this region, anyway?

They had not come to do honest trapping, and at this time of year desperadoes of their stripe usually sought the border towns or migrated south to a warmer clime.

Yes, what took them to the wilderness?

Old Sile knew they were men who seldom did anything without a motive.

He could give a pretty accurate guess that the Fortunatus bee still buzzed very loudly close to Caleb's ear, and that he was loth to give up the wonderful scheme

he had arranged whereby young Lee might prove a veritable gold mine on his hands.

Old Sile listened to the snapping of the snow-covered boughs in the forest, as the cold worked among them. He heard the soft winnowing of an owl close by. He looked up to where the stars peeped out of a frosty sky, and he shook his grizzled head.

"I'm afraid they'll force me to do it, much as I hate to drap a man. But I give 'em fair warnin', and it'll be no fault o' mine if so be they force my hand. All I ask is to be let alone in peace; but the ole spirit runs high to-night, an' they'd best look out."

After a while, believing the fellows had really made for the ravine in order to start a campfire and make themselves comfortable, he again entered the cabin, taking care to secure the door on the inside.

The boys had cleared up what muss the strange encounter had caused, and were now only waiting for Sile to begin supper.

All being sharply pressed by hunger, which the recent affair had in no wise abated, they set about the congenial task of eating before commenting on the situation.

Karl tried hard to be quite as usual, but it was difficult to keep the twinkle of humor from appearing in the corners of his eyes when he thought of the sailor's hornpipe Caleb Cross had indulged in while receiving his medicine.

Finally, Old Sile himself started the racket by leaning back and snorting in his peculiar way.

"That was a round-up wuth talkin' about, I'm tellin' you. Never seed so hot a time in a dugout. Every dipper went straight to the mark, an' for the life o' me I don't see how the tenderfoot got his noose over the greaser so pat. It was well done, boys; I give ye great credit—wonderfully well done. Parse the coffee this

way, Karl; tastes unusually good to-night arter a cold day."

By degrees the veteran told what he had done during the day.

At sight of the silver fox pelt, worth several times its weight in gold, their enthusiasm was aroused.

This was something like business. If those rascally allies would only let them alone to enjoy this paradise in the wilderness, there promised to be good times ahead.

At any rate, they had a tower of strength in Old Sile.

So they took heart and tried to forget the evil influence which had sought them out here, far from the haunts of men.

It was very comfortable in the old dugout while the Frost King exerted himself without so that even the little creek was congealing and would be icebound by morning.

Time slipped along.

At about their usual hour for retiring the boys were surprised to see Old Sile put on his fur cap, and make other preparations as if to go out for a jaunt.

Instinctively they guessed his mission.

He was not easy in his mind regarding the interlopers in their Eden, and meant to take a little scout toward the ravine.

"Fasten the door behind me. When I come I'll call Karl," he said, and disappeared.

It was about nine o'clock.

The sky, as seen overhead where the bushy-topped pines grew scantily, was as clear as a bell, and a multitude of stars shone as they only seem to shine on a frosty winter's night.

Old Sile had by no means forgotten the tricks learned many years before, when there was always war to the knife between the Indians and those daring trapper bands venturing into the haunts of gameland after fur.

He moved off like a shadow, his gun ready for immediate use should the occasion arise.

Old memories were revived.

He lived again those halcyon days when at the side of bluff Kit Carson he had learned the secrets of nature, and how the energy of a white man might overcome the cunning of savage hearts.

It was a pleasant sensation in one respect, and then again he experienced regret, for there were some stormy scenes in his checkered career that as an old man Sile would not enjoy resurrecting, although they were nothing to be ashamed of.

All the while he covered ground with his long legs, heading steadily for the ravine to which he had directed the twain.

Would they heed his warning and clear out of the region in the morning?

He had meant all he said, and it would be a serious thing if they dared him further.

On the way he saw no living thing but a skulking wolf that made off over the white ground in great haste, alarmed at the presence of man, for these animals seldom grow bold save when hunting in packs.

Before Sile reached the ravine he could see the reflection of a fire and knew the men were there.

Still he persisted in going closer.

There was little fear of discovery, since he had an idea that the fellows would rather hug the warm blaze than prowl around hunting danger.

They knew how to keep away the chilly breath of Jack Frost. Two fires had been built, and between them the adventurers sprawled, sucking consolation from black pipes and in all probability laying plans for the morrow.

Old Sile had seen enough.

He nodded his head wisely while he muttered:

"If ye mind yer good angel, ye'll be levantin' with the first streak o' day. It's dangerous to monkey with a buzz saw. And now to home and bed."

Satisfied, he turned his back on the coulie and walked away with a springy step, just as though he had not tramped weary miles since sunset of the previous day.

That iron frame seemed good for some years of campaigning yet.

Perhaps, could Old Sile have heard the subject of the conversation engrossing the attention of those two delightful scoundrels, he might not have departed with such a care-free mind.

For they meant mischief.

The disaster that had overwhelmed them at the dugout had aroused every slumbering atom of evil in their natures.

It would not be like such vagabonds to flee the country without one last desperate attempt to get even.

Fairly satisfied with the way things were working, the veteran soon covered the half-mile intervening between ravine and camp.

He found the door barred, but upon uttering the signal agreed upon Karl quickly opened to him.

Neither of the boys had crawled into their bunks. In the first place, they did not feel sleepy after the long nap of the afternoon, and then, again, the recent excitement had not as yet wholly left them.

Until Sile showed up, they felt as though on guard.

At any rate, this vigil was as nothing when compared with what Karl endured on the previous night in his lone camp, where the hungry wolves kept up their concert, and the panther made a bid for his provisions.

When Sile had given in a report of his cruise, the boys breathed easier.

The danger was then a thing of the past.

They could snuggle down under the warm woolen blankets, after the fire had been arranged to burn some hours, and defy the rigors of the night.

No matter how bitter the temperature without, it only takes a moderate blaze to make a dugout feel comfortable.

Homely it is, and must always be, as a place of residence, but for genuine comfort the "hole in the hill" beats all creation.

Soon silence fell upon the scene.

Only the snapping of a burning brand or the heavy breathing of a sleeper could be heard.

The hours glided on.

Outside the prowling predatory wolf sneaked up to the door of the cabin, and then trotted away to mournfully bewail his hungry condition within the timber's shelter. The lonely owl in the wood whimpered his woes and called to his absent mate. The night wind murmured through the needles of the whispering pines; yet within the dugout all was warm and cheery.

Once, twice, Old Sile got up and threw another log on the fire. Habits of years were not to be shaken off, and each time he rose he opened the door for an observation, always finding the weather conditions the same.

At the tail end of the night, just an hour or so before daybreak, slumber lies heaviest of all upon mankind.

By chance Cuthbert awoke.

A nightmare had perhaps burst the bonds of slumber and caused his eyes to open; or, possibly, he had finished his sleep.

As he lay there, rubbing his eyes and yawning, his attention was attracted toward a bright line at the window, where the shutter failed to completely cover the opening.

It was rosy red, like the blush of dawn when the sun's glorious rays shoot aslant the horizon.

But, then, the window was on the southern side of

the cabin, and never before had he seen the light of sunrise through the opening.

Thus it broke upon him that there was something very singular about it.

There was Old Sile. He ought to know.

When Cuthbert's lusty voice had broken loose two half-dressed figures sprang out upon the hard earth floor. One look the veteran gave, and then made for the door, shouting:

"This way, quick, boys! All creation's bein' warmed up. Them onery skunks have been an' fired the heap o' brush alongside the cabin!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A MEMORY OF THE STAMPEDE.

The boys only waited to pull on some outer garments, remembering the bitterness of the atmosphere without, and then they, too, made for the open air as speedily as possible. It was a calamity that threatened them, for, should the cabin go up in flames, the chances were that they must lose the greater part of their stores, those necessities upon which they depended for their winter's campaign.

The prospect was really appalling.

The fire blazed high up in the frosty air, and lighted the adjacent pine forest, giving a terrible scarlet tinge to every object within a radius of twenty yards.

As clear as day they could see the ice-bound brook and the landing near by.

It was no time for such observation.

Old Sile, half-robed as he was, had gone to work with heroic zeal.

He seemed a veritable salamander as he rushed into the midst of the brush and threw it right and left, as though a cyclone had struck in that quarter.

It was their only chance to save the cabin front of their dugout and all it contained.

The boys entered the game with a vim such as characterizes the cattle-herders in all they undertake.

Snatching up such poles as came under their hands, they threw themselves into the midst of the brush heap.

With such an example before them as the valorous veteran, there was no danger of the boys not doing their share.

It was a hustling scene for a brief time.

Not a shout did they give, but with grim earnestness of purpose they stamped on the brush, scattered it over the snow-covered surface of the earth, and in various ways played havoc with the monster that had threatened to destroy their home.

Such tactics deserved success, and were bound to bring it about.

When Old Sile saw that they had won, he left the boys to complete the job and hurried inside the cabin to don more clothes.

There they found him later, toasting his feet before the fire, which he had started into new life.

The old fellow had received numerous burns, none of them serious, luckily, and his face was almost as black as that of a Guinea negro, so that when he turned and smiled at the boys of one accord they burst into a hearty laugh.

"Wall, I declar' to Moses, but that was an experience, now. I like a fire such raw weather as this, but that was a leetle too hot."

The humorous look left his face, and he scowled like a pirate.

"Them miserable critters thought to git even by burnin' us in our bunks, or, at least, makin' 'way with all our possessions. Let me git sight o' 'em agin, and they'll pay the piper as them that dance should."

Old Sile could look very ferocious when he chose, and few there were who cared to provoke the veteran to anger.

He was a powerful man with muscles hardened by long years of outdoor exercise until they seemed like steel.

Cuthbert felt uneasy.

Men who would be guilty of a deed like this might not

hesitate to play the part of bushwhacker, and shoot from ambush.

"Our winter's sport is spoiled, then," he said, moodily enough, for he had counted on having a glorious time all around.

"Oh, I don't know!" ventured Karl, who had so much dependence on Old Sile that he was ready to believe him capable of anything.

The veteran smiled.

"But if those scoundrels are going to annoy us all the time, where's the fun?" continued Cuthbert, only half reassured.

"Make your mind easy on that score, lad; they ain't goin' to give us any more bother, I reckon. This was the last strike. They know Old Sile, an' I warrant you they be makin' tracks out o' this region jest now as fast as their legs kin take 'em. They expect I'll pick up the trail, an' that'll keep 'em on the jump right along."

He chuckled softly, as though mentally picturing the hasty exodus of the adventurous couple from Paradise Valley.

"Will you pursue?" asked Karl.

"What's the use? Let 'em run. We ain't hurt, I reckon. All we kin do is to wait and allers be ready in case they comes back along toward spring. Then—wall, I shan't ask no questions, but jest whack in."

That was the programme.

When the sun came up and breakfast had been dispatched, they set about repairing any small damage that had been done to the camp.

Of course, with the brush heap gone, the cabin was in plain sight, should any one pass up or down the creek, but this could not be remedied, and they must let it go.

Possibly not a living soul save themselves would be in the valley all winter.

I L. of C.

There were always some chances to take in affairs of this kind, and this must not be allowed to interfere with the keen enjoyment that had been anticipated.

So they took up the routine again.

The boys made the round of the traps, for by this time they were to be trusted with the delicate task, so quickly had they acquired the knack under Old Sile's tutelage.

As for him, he had various duties to perform, preparing what skins they had already secured, including the precious silver fox and Karl's panther.

Then he set out to visit the scene of Karl's night vigil, intending to bring in the balance of the elk meat, if so be the cats had not made off with it before now.

So well had Karl described the place that the veteran made a bee line for it, and in less than two hours discovered the blackened stump of the burnt pine.

There was the upturned forest monarch, with its roots and the mold attached, forming a magnificent shelter against a northerly storm.

He could easily see the whole thing in imagination—Karl sitting there, and the great gray cat upon the branch of a pine—yes, it was even possible to locate the particular limb.

The snow was tracked up by wolves, and all traces of anything edible had completely vanished as though by magic.

From this spot Old Sile laid his course for the double pine where Karl had his first adventure with the wounded elk.

Again he hit his objective point with unerring skill, proving his knowledge of woodcraft to be of the highest order.

There was the package of elk meat, suspended just as Karl had left it, and wrapped in the frozen skin of the animal.

A couple of wolves loped away at his approach, and a wolverine about to make an attack on the provisions disputed his rights with such an ugly front that Old Sile dropped him by means of a well-directed shot.

When he reached the dugout he had just about as big a load on his shoulders as he cared to carry.

The boys were back from making the rounds.

A few pelts had been secured, but nothing remarkably fine—silver foxes were not to be run across every day, it seemed.

Cuthbert sauntered off, gun in hand, to pick up some small game for supper.

He was not particular what it should be. A couple of long-eared jack rabbits would have filled the bill, if nothing else showed itself.

In less than twenty minutes he was back at the cabin out of breath.

"Ducks—a whole hangout of 'em, down the creek where it widens into a little lake. The middle isn't frozen; and they're there. Come along, Karl," he gasped, as he hastened to lay hold of the shotgun—a twelve-bore Parker that had served him faithfully during many a Virginia hunt.

Into his pocket he jammed a dozen shells, loaded with duckshot—about number threes.

Karl was busy making something, and shook his head in the negative.

Truth to tell, the boy still felt the effects of his dance around the trees when so hotly pursued by the mad elk, and hardly cared to walk any more than he had already done that day.

"Let all the glory be yours, old chap. But be sure and get three—one apiece—for I'm able to pick the bones of a full-grown mallard," he called.

Cuthbert wagged his head and laughed.

Then he ran off down the creek.

Drawing near the pond, he stirred up his hunter instincts, so as to approach it the right way.

Luck doubtless enters into duck hunting, as well as nearly everything else, but there is much to be learned regarding the habits of the birds, and this knowledge usually brings its reward in the way of fat bags.

Cuthbert had done considerable of this thing along the eastern shore in Maryland, where the canvasbacks feed upon wild celery and acquire the delicious flavor that sometimes makes them worth five dollars a brace in the market. Along Chincoteague way and all through that famous oyster region he had been wont to spend many weeks early each winter.

Hence, he knew something about ducks, though their habits differ in various localities and the game found in the great Mississippi Valley or the Northwest would have to be hunted in a manner quite at variance to that in vogue along the bays of the Atlantic seaboard.

He finally began his advance.

There was some brush for shelter.

Besides, the bank of the creek just here chanced to be rather high, and by creeping on hands and knees, occasionally snaking it when necessary, he approached the edge.

The ducks were still there—two dozen of them.

By degrees he gained a point which was within fair gunshot of the wild fowl.

Now for a potshot at them as they sat there, and a second on the wing when they arose!

There was a tremendous excitement out on the water when his gun spoke.

Most of the wary birds sprang into the air, though several kicked about on the water.

Cuthbert had eyes for only those in the act of escaping,

and with keen judgment he picked out a little knot that arose with swiftly-beating wings, to send his second load among them with continued disastrous effects.

What result?

Cuthbert smiled with satisfaction when he counted seven in all—five with their webbed toes turned up and two cripples.

He had some little sport with these latter, and was compelled to expend five shells before he made way with one.

The other escaped entirely.

This was an old story with Cuthbert, who had many a time chased a cripple a mile in a boat, shooting at him again and again, only to have him escape in the rushes, or, perchance, when mortally wounded, dive to the bottom, seize hold of the eel grass with his bill, and stay there, as if to spite his destroyer.

Six! well, that was very good—just twice the number Karl had asked for.

Then a question arose. How was he to get the game, now that it had fallen before his gun?

No doubt they would presently all float to that side of the open space nearest the creek below. The current would accomplish that part of the business, even if the wind failed.

How far would the ice hold him?

Cuthbert made ready.

First of all, he cut down a long, slender sapling with a crotch at the end, with which he hoped to pick the ducks up if he could ever get within reach of them.

Then he tested the ice.

A couple of dry splinters from a pine that had been riven by a lightning bolt afforded him some assistance.

It was laborious enough, but what sportsman does not

enjoy this overcoming of all difficulties in the task of retrieving his game?

And finally the last duck was snatched from the water.

Cuthbert looked around.

The afternoon was not yet gone, though the sun had sunk pretty low in the west.

Twice, while he retrieved the floating game, there had been a whistle of wings, and several mallards dropped into the pond.

Of course, his movements frightened the wary birds off again, but the fact that they kept coming in this way aroused his ambition.

Why not make a blind on the bank with some brush, and lie in wait for another shot or two?

The temptation was great. He knew he really ought to be on the way back to camp, so that the game might be prepared for supper.

Human nature, however, is weak when the question of duty or pleasure arises.

Cuthbert built the blind.

It was quickly thrown together, with some hemlock browse for his comfort in kneeling.

Then he waited.

This was quite like old times.

Never had he dreamed he would be doing this sort of thing away in the heart of the Northwestern wilderness.

He had not long to wait, for the ducks seemed to particularly fancy this open sheet of water.

A whistle of wings brought Cuthbert to the ready, though he remained perfectly motionless, with the sagacity of an old wild fowler.

The ducks, four in number, circled high over the pond, saw nothing suspicious, made another sweep, then came down and set their wings to drop at about the center.

It was then he fired, and one bird fell.

The others just touched the water, and were bounding up like rubber balls when Cuthbert again let drive.

A second bird dropped with a splash while another steered a diagonal line for the earth, and struck the bank with a thud that was particularly pleasing to the ear of an enthusiastic sportsman.

This was wholesale business.

He waited yet awhile, and was rewarded by the appearance of a single bird. The marshes were frozen up, and, of necessity, these tardy water fowl were compelled to seek the open pond, ere again starting on their migration to the Texan sea coast.

It took two shots to bag this fellow of the swift wing. He became suspicious ere settling, and was heading off when Cuthbert arose and opened his batteries upon him.

The second shot was at exceedingly long range, but, thanks to the size of the pellets he used, it brought the greenhead down like a plummet in the way that makes the heart glad.

This was surely enough.

By the time he had retrieved these fellows the day was done.

Besides, Cuthbert became conscious of the fact that it was cold work here by the water, with ice and snow all around.

His fingers and toes felt it, for one needs to be well prepared against chill while lying motionless in a duck blind.

There was half a mile to tramp, and almost a round dozen birds—no light weight, by any means—so that Cuthbert soon felt his circulation restored, save in his fingers, he having forgotten his woolen gloves.

Many hands made light work, and three of the mallards were soon baking in the patent folding oven that had

been brought along, so that they might not be without an occasional feast of hot bread during the winter.

Old Sile prided himself on his knowledge of cookery. Of course, a domestic *chef* might have turned up his nose at his manner of accomplishing things, but it was done after camp rules, and the result could not have been improved upon, anyway—so the boys had many times declared.

Those savory ducks filled the dugout with their fragrance whenever Sile opened the oven door to baste them with gravy.

On such occasions, the boys would groan, and Cuthbert even ran outdoors to walk up and down, as though unable to stand it.

At last the reveille of the range—that summons to dinner with a knife rattling on a tin saucepan—announced the feast ready.

They ate like starving men—like castaways just rescued from a drifting yawl.

Not a word was said for at least ten minutes, and then Cuthbert cast a wishful eye toward the bunch of wild fowl, as though he actually regretted their lack of wisdom in supplying but one apiece.

This set Karl to laughing, and, the ice being broken, conversation ensued.

Cuthbert managed to stay his appetite after the duck's bones had been polished clean, with some venison steak, baked potatoes, bread and butter galore, and several cups of coffee, taken clear because they had no milk.

"This is solid comfort," he declared, when finally he was forced to stop, much to the relief of his comrades, who began to fear lest their provisions would never hold out at such a rate.

"Yes, duck hunting is hungry work," remarked Old Sile, calmly smoking.

He was not a hearty eater, and preferred his pipe above all things; but the boys were lusty young cubs and growing apace, so that they needed frequent stuffing.

"Well, I think I had three good meals the night I spent alone in the timber," said Karl.

"Yes; a cold snap makes one keen, and, besides, a man eats to pass away time under such conditions. It's a tedious job, I declar to Moses, a stayin' up all night, an' I've done it many a time, too."

"What was your worst experience of all? When did you wish most to see daylight?" asked Cuthbert, lying back at his ease after the manner of one who had dined well and whom nothing could harm.

Old Sile, sitting cross-legged, like a Turk, by the fire, sent a few whiffs of tobacco smoke drifting upward.

He had one eye shut and seemed to be taking a retrospective glance along his past life, as though bent upon weighing the desperate chances he had many times run,

"Wall, I reckon of all the bad nights in my experience thar don't any o' 'em come up to the time o' the big stampede."

The boys pricked up their ears, for anything that savored of cowboy life interested them intensely. They, too, knew what an ordinary stampede meant. They had seen the long-horned cattle crazed with fright—"bellowing mad," as the boys called it—and there had been rumors in camp among the riders of Sunset Ranch that Old Sile had had an experience in that line which stood unequaled among the annals of cattle hustlers.

And now it was coming, in his own terse, quaint way, to be sure, but imagination could supply the missing links, and paint it all with the glow of inspiration.

There was no way in which the veteran could be hurried. In all other things he was quick and active, up to

the top notch, but, when it came to speech, molasses in winter could hardly be more sluggish.

"It was quite some years back, and I was more spry than I am now. No man on the range could beat me with hoss and rope, and whenever thar was a particular piece o' work to be done the boss called on Sile Wegg.

"I thought I knowed what a stampede was like. Had been through a dozen, mebbe; but, I declar to Moses! if the hull pesky lot were rolled in one it couldn't beat that night.

"Jerusalem! I never seed the ekal o' it! The storm broke as though the hull bottom o' the sky meant to fall out, the lightning whizzed and the thunder crashed just like a battle was on—an' I've been in some hot ones durin' Grant's campaign on the Mississip.

"I never seed cattle so uneasy like when the storm was a comin' boomin' up over the prairie. 'Twas all we could do to keep 'em in the rope corral, 'cause, ye see, thar was goin' to be some shippin' done the next day; that is, the boss rancher calculated on it, but he was away off," with a chuckle.

"Gee whiz! when the time come around to ship, them cattle was scattered twenty mile in every direction, some done up on the ground, others still running with their tails up on end and foamin' at the mouth.

"Such fire and brimstone I hope I may never see agin. Why, the air was actually charged with electricity that skooted this way an' that like fiery balls, and bustin' with a report that sounded like the end of the world had come.

"You boys know what effect an electric storm has on cattle. Wall, this was a dozen such storms rolled into one!

"They went stark starin' crazy, an' we could no more hold 'em than we could a harricane. We shouted an' rode an' did everything known to cowboy craft to direct

their attention from the storm to us, but it wouldn't work wuth a cent.

"Through the ropes they busted, and I found myself in the middle of the hull mob o' crazy cattle, carried away with the stampede."

He drew a long puff at his pipe and watched the blue coils of smoke curling upward, as though in that haze he could see visions of the past.

The boys had been concerned in stampedes of all sorts, and they could readily imagine the danger of being caught in the very midst of a bellowing, fear-maddened rush of cattle, such as Old Sile described.

"Thar was nothin' to be done, I seen, but keep my hoss on his legs, and go with the crowd, avoiding' them long horns as well as I could.

"I reckon I'll never forgit that ere gallop, if I live to a good hundred, with the rattle o' thunder in my ears and the etarnal flash o' lightnin' in my eyes.

"The cattle seemed to huddle more or less in a heap, as though thar might be safety in numbers, which was jest the thing I didn't want, 'cause, ye see, if they scattered, I'd soon have got clear o' the press.

"I had the smartest cayuse on the range, an' I honestly believe only for that I'd a gone under quick enough, to be trampled into a pancake.

"That pony knowed heaps, and managed to slip through openings that I never even saw. The lightnin' was so dazzlin' I felt like my eyes was burned out, an' all I could make o' it was a horrible jumble o' horned heads crashin' together, and tails up on end, jest like the nightmare fer a fact.

"Thar I was, and' ye kin imagine what I put through in them five or more miles.

"By good luck, the broncho, by twistin' an' turnin'

jest to avoid the squeeze, managed to work near one o' the flanks.

"I seed the stream o' crazy cattle was gettin' thinner on the left, an', with a new hope, began to press my way in that quarter. Of course, I shouted at the top o' my voice, but they never paid the least attention to me, and I reckon my whoop was like an angel's whisper, with all that din of a thousand crackin' hoofs and the awful, constant boom of thunder that sounded like Gabriel's trump had marked the bustin' up o' the universe.

"But now thar was a prospect o' gettin' rid o' that whirlwind o' horns an' hoofs, so I began to use my eyes for all they was wuth.

"Twice I found myself in a pocket, with handsome chances o' bein' squeezed, but both times I crawled out—my hoss saved me the fust time, by plungin' through a narrow openin' that closed solid after us, an' when the thing happened again, I used my gun on the beast that seemed to be the keystone o' the hull affair, droppin' him in his tracks, so that he tumbled some others in a heap, an' left me a chance to change my base.

"That was the last bit of maneuverin' I had to do, for my hoss darted out o' the pack afore it could close again, an' I had a clear field once more.

"The last I seen o' the herd as they swept along was them waving horns an' tails cavortin' over the perairie in a tangled mass, with the fiery bolts darting zigzag through the air and the bellowin' thunder makin' the very airth tremble.

"They went twenty mile, and it took us jest a week to corral the beasts again. Some we never found, an' I've often wondered since that night if the pesky critters wasn't a-runnin' yet," and Old Sile wound up with one of his peculiar yet expressive chuckles.

CHAPTER IX.

WINTER IN THE WILDERNESS.

Winter had at last set in.

Old Sile, who knew this country like a book, and was pretty much of a weather prophet, declared that they would see no more open spells for some months to come.

Every preparation had been made for just such severe weather, and, as the sport was what they had come after, the boys uttered no word of complaint.

Frozen hard was the creek.

Even Cutbert's pond had a solid coating of ice, and the ducks came no longer to their favorite hole to prune themselves in the sunshine and dig up the wild rice growing there.

But there were other things to engage the attention of the young fur gatherers.

With this coming of snow, it was possible to see the tracks of the various animals, both large and small, that abounded in Paradise Valley.

Besides, the frosty air gave these beasts a keen appetite which it was difficult to satisfy; and, consequently, they were not near so chary about walking into a trap as when food was more plentiful.

The great pine woods at times took on a wonderful appearance, when a wet snow had fallen that clung wherever it touched.

Then it was like fairyland, every branch and twig looking like the veins of a vast cobweb, whitened by a magician's wand until they sparkled in the morning sun like a vast multitude of diamonds suspended aloft.

Cuthbert was more or less inclined to be poetical. At

least, he had an artistic eye, and delighted in just such wonderful pictures.

Karl, more practical, thought of how such a packed snowfall would affect the hunting.

And yet, in his way, Karl loved to commune with Nature. There was a spirit within his being that had, many a time, caused him to sit up at night listening to the weird voices of prairie or forest, or which held him spellbound with admiration when the setting sun painted the fleeting clouds a gorgeous glow.

With one it was partly a matter of education, while the prairie boy had only instinct and natural love for nature to arouse him.

Success seemed to attend their labors.

Some days were better than others, but on the whole the veteran declared the traps were yielding a goodly harvest, considering how times had changed, and what inroads had been made upon the stock of game since the days when he used to go trapping in such famous company.

As the weather became more bitter they realized the truth of what Old Sile had prophesied regarding the good qualities of a dugout.

They had no difficulty about keeping warm.

After a long and exhausting tramp, either to look after the traps or in search of game, it was a blessed thing to approach their camp in the shiver of nightfall, and see that friendly glow through the one window; to anticipate the genial warmth awaiting the tired pilgrim beyond the homely portal, and perchance to catch the delightful aroma of a supper fit for even a crowned head, which would be served as soon as the wanderer had thawed out before the blazing hearth.

Ah, yes! home was a haven indeed, and well did the

poet, far away across the sea, an exile from his native land, sing:

"Be it ever so humble,
There's no place like home."

Around that same blazing fire later in the evening, the three comrades would gather, perchance to relate some queer experience that had happened on that same day, or which recalled an adventure of the past; to speak of dear old Sunset Ranch and the happy days spent on the range; of the Indian village, where Cuthbert had been a prisoner, adopted into the tribe in place of the boy whom dread disease had stolen from the chief; or, it might be the time when they chased into the Bad Lands in pursuit of this same Caleb Cross and his fellows, into whose hands Cuthbert's little sister, the sunbeam of the ranch had once fallen.

Old Sile would sit there on a bearskin with his back propped up against the wall, sending his fragrant smoke in rings toward the big, yawning chimney that was connected with the old stump above, and into which the draft drew almost every fragrant of those circling coils.

It was also a usual thing for one of the boys to open the door connecting with the little cave where the cubs lived, and in would come tumbling Rags and Tatters, full of the very old Nick, ready for a frolic.

They had long since become quite at home with their human comrades, and exhibited not the least sign of fear.

Some of their antics were very laughable, and from the time of their entry until their exit they kept the house in an uproar.

They soon began to develop the traits that were to govern their future, and the boys discovered how different two cubs might be in disposition, even when they were by nature perfect duplicates.

Rags was the easier to manage, his brother having quite a fierce temper, so that it was generally poor Tatters, who received a sound box on the ear for being a little too demonstrative in his rough play with the boys.

The life was never monotonous.

New things seemed constantly occurring, or were being discussed.

Old Sile had many surprises for the youngsters.

The first thing he did was to teach them how to use the snowshoes.

Even Karl was green at this, his life having been almost wholly spent upon the cattle ranges, where a mount is depended on in stormy weather.

Cuthbert had always wanted to have a try at this sort of thing, and he went at it with a vim that promised great success.

Brought up in Virginia, where the snow seldom stays on the ground long enough to use a sleigh, he had been debarred from such healthy sports as come in the way of boys living in Vermont, Maine or Canada.

And when, later on, the snow would be several feet deep on the level, they would have found it impossible to have visited their traps or gone about in search of game but for these same indispensable snowshoes.

There did not seem to be any danger of their being without fresh meat for a long time.

All they had to do was to travel out to the "stock yards," as Cuthbert called it, shoot an elk, and bring him in, or, rather, the choice portions best suited for their needs.

It was Cuthbert who first discovered the herd of elk.

They had made what is known as a "yard," just as moose in Canada do, tramping down the snow under the trees in a certain quarter, and living upon the tender twigs which could be reached.

Old Sile explained the whole thing to the boys.

He was delighted with the find, and declared that, if they were reasonably careful not to alarm the game too much, they might secure many a quarter of fresh meat from that yard.

The wolves haunted the place in vast numbers, drawn, no doubt, by the presence of their natural quarry, and the feast which the boys left behind every time a killing took place.

Sooner or later as the winter wore on and these animals grew bolder with hunger, they would have trouble with these "varmints," and for that reason especially Old Sile insisted on their always carrying an extra supply of ammunition in their belts, as well as full magazines.

Karl had found another bonanza.

Chopping a hole through the ice in the pond, he had been enabled to take some trout, spearing them somewhat after the fashion of those who take pickerel or lake whitefish during the period of winter.

This was a welcome addition to their fare, and always greedily anticipated.

Even Rags and Tatters took keen pleasure in squabbling over the bones when Karl's luck had been of the buoyant order.

Birds were scarce in numbers; at least, anything that might serve as food.

Owls were to be heard every night, hooting from some deadwood tree near by; hawks sailed over the snowy water at times, on the keen scent for food, and once Karl saw a majestic bald-headed eagle that might have stretched seven feet from tip to tip of his wings.

He might have shot the great bird, as it alighted on the top of a dead pine, close to where he was working with a red fox taken in a trap, but he smothered the temptation as something bordering on sacrilege.

True, the bird was a bold robber, and would sooner lie in wait for a fishhawk to snatch his prey than to drop down himself to do the work; but, all the same, the great American people had chosen to stamp him with all the noble qualities he was at one time supposed to possess, and given him an artificial endowment, and for that reason he should be exempt from the fate that usually befalls such piratical craft.

So he sailed away in safety, uttering a discordant scream as he went, whether in mockery at Karl's tenderheartedness or in thanks, bird fashion, the boy never knew.

There were crows, too.

They flew over at daybreak and back again before evening came.

Old Sile said they had a rookery away back in the mountains. He had once paid a visit to the place, and found as dismal and weird a spectacle as one might expect to discover in the swamps of Louisiana or Florida.

Where they went to feed he had no idea, but it was probably many miles away, to some river that was not in the grasp of the Ice King, and in the current of which they found some species of food, not very fattening, perhaps, but enough to ward off starvation.

Then it was possible they knew of timber where some species of berry grew, for these birds are exceedingly keen on the scent of anything that promises a prospect of food.

By degrees their accumulation of pelts began to cover quite a wide range.

Indeed, Old Sile said they had secured several animals which he had not obtained before in this favored region.

There were the grizzly skins, that of the panther, of many bobcats and wolves, foxes, coyotes, badger, wolver-

ine, beaver, raccoons and muskrats, besides the skins of the elk and deer that were used for food.

Karl had a great time with some otter that inhabited a series of underground galleries among the rocks bordering the creek.

Very cunning indeed were the slender animals, for a long time defying his keenest endeavors, until in despair he appealed to Cæsar, and Ole Sile, out of the abundance of his knowledge, told him how to arrange things so that the suspicions of the animals would be quieted.

And so he captured them, one by one, but it took pretty much the whole winter to accomplish the entire job, and when the last one was bagged Karl thought he deserved great credit.

Under the tutelage of Old Sile the boys had soon learned that most particular part of a successful trapper's business, curing the pelts that were taken.

He always used boards to stretch the skins upon, and a liberal supply of thin pine had been brought along for this purpose.

With most animals the skin was cut open underneath from head to tail, and great care was taken not to stretch it too tight. The skins were dried in the air, never at a fire or in the sun, nor would Old Sile use salt, alum or any other agent in curing, declaring his belief that the quality of the skin deteriorated under such a barbarous process, which was fit only for the hides of cattle intended for leather.

Muskrats had to be "cased," not cut open, and the fur side turned in.

There were a great many of these along the creek, and the boys had great success in trapping them at certain places.

Many times they could have shot the fur-bearing animals whose pelts they envied, but Old Sile had put a veto

upon this method, declaring that such skins were often valueless on account of the holes torn in them.

They had not forgotten Caleb Cross.

Something within seemed to tell them that the scheming rascal would show up again, but in all probability not before spring.

Such thieves, before raiding a camp, always like to wait until the industrious trapper has laid by a goodly stock of furs.

Doubtless Cross had participated in more than one cattle foray in Texas, whence he had drifted north, driving the stolen herds across the border into Mexico, where their identity could not be proven, the marks having been rebranded, and hence a raid on a trapper's camp would be quite in his line.

Old Sile never forgot.

He was always on the watch for the return of the desperadoes, whom he expected to come in augmented numbers, though he also rested under the belief that there was little danger of their showing up until winter was close upon its dying gasp.

Familiarity with the entire region soon made the boys feel quite at home.

They had ventured on extended hunts, generally on their snowshoes and together.

Thus they avoided trouble to a great degree, and if it did descend upon them it was the more easily borne because of company.

One experience came upon them that certainly deserves passing mention, for it proved to be something they would not soon forget.

During an extended hunt a sudden change in the weather took place.

The sky clouded, the wind became fearfully keen, and

experienced Karl knew they were in for a severe blizzard.

To reach home was impossible, and it became necessary to meet the emergency.

They worked with frantic eagerness to find fuel for a fire, but on this occasion conditions proved very unfavorable.

Their hope was to find a fallen tree, but, though several had been seen during the tramp, of course one was not forthcoming just when so greatly needed.

A few branches, castaways, it seemed, were picked up, and camp made in the best location possible, where a clump of trees would protect them in some measure.

The storm burst upon them with a violence Karl had never seen equaled.

The wind fairly shrieked in demoniac glee, whirling the round pellets of hard snow through the air with such force that they stung like nettles wherever they struck the flesh.

So filled was the air with fine snow dust that it was utterly impossible to see more than ten feet in any direction, and even Karl doubted his ability to guide the expedition safely back to camp again, so that he did not dare attempt the venture.

Their fire burned feebly.

They did not risk a wholesale blaze, on account of the scarcity of fuel.

Had it been an ordinary storm, their work must have consisted in skirmishing around for other vagabond branches that might protrude out of the snow, but with this dreadful blizzard in full swing they dared not go beyond sight of the little fire lest they lose themselves.

Cuthbert discovered this paralyzing feature of the case, and nearly to his sorrow.

In his ambition to augment the scanty supply of fuel,

which would never last out the long and dreadful night that stretched before them, he began to hunt around, now and again finding a treasure in a small way, until suddenly he discovered that the fire was no longer to be seen.

He was at once alarmed.

Fortunately he did not begin to rush this way and that in an agony of fear, but immediately filled his young lungs and began to shout his comrade's name.

Karl, while busily engaged making a rude snowhouse shelter, heard a faint call that filled him with apprehension, and for the first time noted the absence of his friend.

He knew the cry came from leeward, and, first casting some fresh fuel on the fire to make as big a blaze as possible, he ran a dozen steps into the storm and sent forth the cowboy shout that had rung over the level prairies many a time when refractory steers kicked over the traces and refused to be decently rounded up.

It was a mercy Cuthbert had the cry borne to his ears by the favoring gale, and was able to tell whence it came.

He groped through the blinding whirlwind, and presently, still guided by Karl's voice, found his way back to the miserable little camp.

When he tossed the armful of wood upon the fire and saw how quickly it was eaten up, the Virginia lad thought it the most dangerous prize he had ever drawn, since to obtain it he had imperiled his own life.

Karl knew a trick or two, and, had their fuel only held out, he would have defied the elements.

The snow was packed in the shape of a house, which served to keep the keenest edge of the driving gale away from them.

Unfortunately, they had not shot any game on the

hunt, so that they were forced to go without supper on this night.

Karl contrasted it with his former experience, and the result made him feel anything but joyful, for with plenty of wood and meat a man may laugh at fortune's frowns, but without these comforts a Northwestern blizzard is apt to prove a very arduous task for the toughest of pilgrims, and many a man has never survived the trial trip.

No wonder these rough riders of the wild west made ideal soldiers under Roosevelt and Wood. Accustomed all their lives to the most active life, in the saddle and out, meeting all manner of deadly dangers in their adventurous career as cowboys and range-riders, they were just the men to storm up San Juan Hill and utterly demoralize the Spaniards.

That night—would either of the boys ever cease to remember it with a shudder?

Though they used their fuel as sparingly as possible, it was at length gone.

Cuthbert looked at his watch with the departing flicker of the very last handful, and was dismayed to find that it was only one o'clock.

Six hours more before morning!

How were they to keep from freezing during that terrible vigil?

Karl knew what depended on him, and was grimly resolved to do everything in his power to save their lives.

The fact that Cuthbert was with him served as an additional incentive.

He showed the other how to slap his arms when his fingers became cold, thus inducing a new flow of blood.

It served for a time, but Cuthbert grew weary of the incessant repetition.

"What's the use?" he said, a little petulantly. "I'm

quite warm now. If I feel cold again, why, I'll start in."

Karl could not see him distinctly, though the night was not absolutely dark, because of the vast white shroud covering the face of the earth.

At the same time a terrible fear gnawed at his heart that his chum, for whom he would have laid down his very life, if necessary, was on the point of freezing, and knew it not.

Desperate cases like this require remedies of the same order.

Karl quickly made up his mind that something must be done to keep Cuthbert awake, even if he quarreled with him and they entered into a rough-and-tumble fight.

There were many ways by means of which this thing could be accomplished. Karl cudgeled his brains to remember the stories of a tragic nature which he had heard old Michigan lumbermen tell, by means of which life had been preserved.

In one instance he recollected it had been done by actually whipping the freezing man with canes, thus inducing circulation, even while he cried out in protest and begged them to let him have just a few minutes' sleep. He would never have awakened more in this world had they foolishly granted his request.

Perhaps Cuthbert might still listen to reason and agree to terms, realizing that his comrade knew more about these things than himself.

To this task Karl set himself.

He argued the matter over eagerly, knowing how great the stakes were for which he contended. Human life is worth a struggle, especially when it is that of a friend who has been one's second self through thick and thin.

Cuthbert was disposed to doubt and scoff a little, whereupon Karl narrated several instances where heroic measures had to be taken in order to save life.

He thought he had convinced the other, whose objections had gradually become less vehement, until they finally ceased entirely.

When Karl saw his head drop forward a horrible sensation of fear almost overwhelmed the lad, for he realized that it had gone even further than he suspected—that Cuthbert was actually on the point of sinking into that fatal slumber preceding death.

Evidently he must be saved against his will.

Karl pounced upon him and shook him.

"Oh! let me alone, old fellow, do now! I'm all right —nothing the matter—warm as toast and awful sleepy, Karl."

His voice died away in a drawl.

Karl then proceeded to arouse him by slapping him right and left, and this rude treatment brought the other to time.

He fought back, hardly knowing what he was doing or whom he assaulted, and Karl was forced to take quite a few stinging blows in the best of good nature, for he realized that his benevolent intentions were being carried out.

By degrees Cuthbert realized his position and was induced to take some exercise.

Thus an hour passed.

Then he reached the tired and sleepy stage again, and it had to be gone over once more from beginning to end.

The prospect would have appalled many a stout man, but Karl was so constituted by Nature that he would never give up until the last gasp.

He pummeled his friend right lustily, and soon aroused

the dormant pugnacity of the hot-blooded Virginian, so that they had a regular old-fashioned fight then and there.

Again was Cuthbert saved.

And a second hour dragged by.

The blizzard still raged as fiercely as ever.

Karl had not lost an iota of his determination to save his chum if it lay within the bounds of human possibility.

When Cuthbert refused to fight and acknowledged himself whipped with the charming frankness that so becomes a true Southern gentleman, Karl seized upon the canes or branches which he had secured and proceeded to lay it on well and good.

So the long, dreadful night passed.

What hope was there?

These blizzards sometimes last for days, and one has been known to hang on a week, gathering new force with the coming of a second storm.

Karl had about lost all hope when the gray dawn came.

That he kept up the fight was simply because of his stubborn nature hating to acknowledge defeat.

Day brought little relief.

Karl might have secured some wood, but he dared not leave Cuthbert even that long.

Again and again he discharged three shots.

It would be almost a miracle if Old Sile heard the signal.

Yet he did. Heaven was kind and drifted him in that quarter just in time.

When the big fellow came upon the snow camp he discovered Karl whipping his chum with shreds of branches, while Cuthbert now and again would attempt to retaliate.

Old Sile quickly found enough fuel for a roaring fire which would last long enough to thaw out the two half-dead lads.

How he got them home through that awful storm even Karl never fully knew.

He remembered tramping and stumbling along; then, when he had fallen, he felt himself picked up and actually "toted" by some friendly giant.

And thus they came home.

Never had the dugout seemed such a blessed haven as then.

Of course, the boys were for dropping upon the floor and going to sleep, but Old Sile insisted on examining hands, feet and ears to discover whether it would be necessary to rub a frosted member with snow.

By this time he had a pot of soup warmed.

The boys would have rather been allowed to seek their bunks, overcome by the delicious warmth of the place that made them more drowsy than ever, but again Old Sile insisted on their each drinking a bowl of the strengthening soup.

They hardly dropped in their bunks ere they were sound asleep.

There they remained until evening, when they awoke in time for supper, remaining up to relate their dread experience, and then once more seeking the comfortable beds, made of fragrant hemlock browse covered with a blanket.

The last sounds Karl heard were the shrieking voices of the blizzard without, complaining because its expected victims had been snatched away at almost the last minute.

CHAPTER X.

THE GALLANT OLD ELK AT BAY.

It took the boys fully a week to recover from the effects of their adventure.

Their bodies were stiff and sore and bore many a black and blue mark, mute witnesses to the desperation with which gallant Karl grappled with the grim monster and fought for the very life of his chum.

He said little of this to Cuthbert, but Old Sile drew the whole terrible story from him by degrees, and was not slow to let Cuthbert know, such was the veteran's unbounded admiration for the lad who could fight with his friend and lash him with withes for five blessed hours in order to save him in spite of himself.

And Cuthbert could not rest, like the whole-souled, generous fellow that he was, until he had thrown his arms about Karl and thanked him for the life he had saved.

The incident that bordered so closely on the line of tragedy served to draw the two boys more closely together than ever.

By degrees they recovered from the experiences of that blizzard night, and took up their share of the burdens.

Old Sile had been visiting the traps every few days, but there were not many pelts taken during the prevalence of that bitter spell.

The evenings were, as before, times of keen enjoyment, when they gathered after the various duties of the day, had a royal supper, and sat around taking it easy, relating experiences or laughing at Rags' and Tatters' gambols.

Old Sile had been down in Mexico a few years back, seeing the country and working on a cattle ranch there, so that the boys found he was in a fairly good position to tell them something about that wonderful country of the old Montezumas.

Karl had heard many strange stories, while his chum had read interesting accounts of life in that favored region, so that when all took a hand in exploiting the fact, a pretty fair idea was formed as to what awaited them when they made their pilgrimage over the border.

With the return of a little milder weather the old sportsman spirit aroused within the boys again.

They went on a hunt.

There were still some sections which had not been fully investigated, and with that ambitious nature so characteristic of young America, they longed to explore.

Just as Old Sile had predicted, the severe weather was making the wolves very bold, and frequently some gaunt chap would get out of their way very grudgingly, as though tempted to assault them.

More than one gray pirate paid the penalty of his rashness, but the supply seemed to be literally inexhaustible, and, as Ole Sile declared in disgust, when finding the remains of a valuable fox about his trap, "the woods are full o' the pesky critters."

Of course, their experience with the blizzard had taught the boys one lesson.

They would not be caught on a long tramp without dried meat, and some coffee in a small pot that could easily be carried, besides a full supply of matches and ammunition, together with a keen-edged hatchet.

Had they possessed this latter, much of their misery and suffering might have been avoided, since it would have been possible to have supplied themselves by hard work with fuel for the fire.

The elk yard still held forth, much to the surprise of Old Sile, who declared he had no idea the animals would hang on to the place when from time to time the campers took such regular toll from the diminishing band.

Somehow both Karl and his chum had grown to detest shooting one of the imprisoned elk, unless food was urgently demanded.

It seemed much like butchery, since the poor animals had so little show, surrounded by that great wall of snow.

Out in the open, where the woods stretched free around him, and there was a chance to make flight, it was quite a different matter to hunt a lordly elk.

Many a time had the boys picked up a fresh trail, and, mounted on their snowshoes, set out in pursuit.

Far away over the snowy landscape they glided with wonderful speed, sometimes to give over the chase as hopeless on account of passing time, and then again, mayhap, to come up with the old fellow floundering through the drifts, when it required some good marksmanship to bring him to his knees.

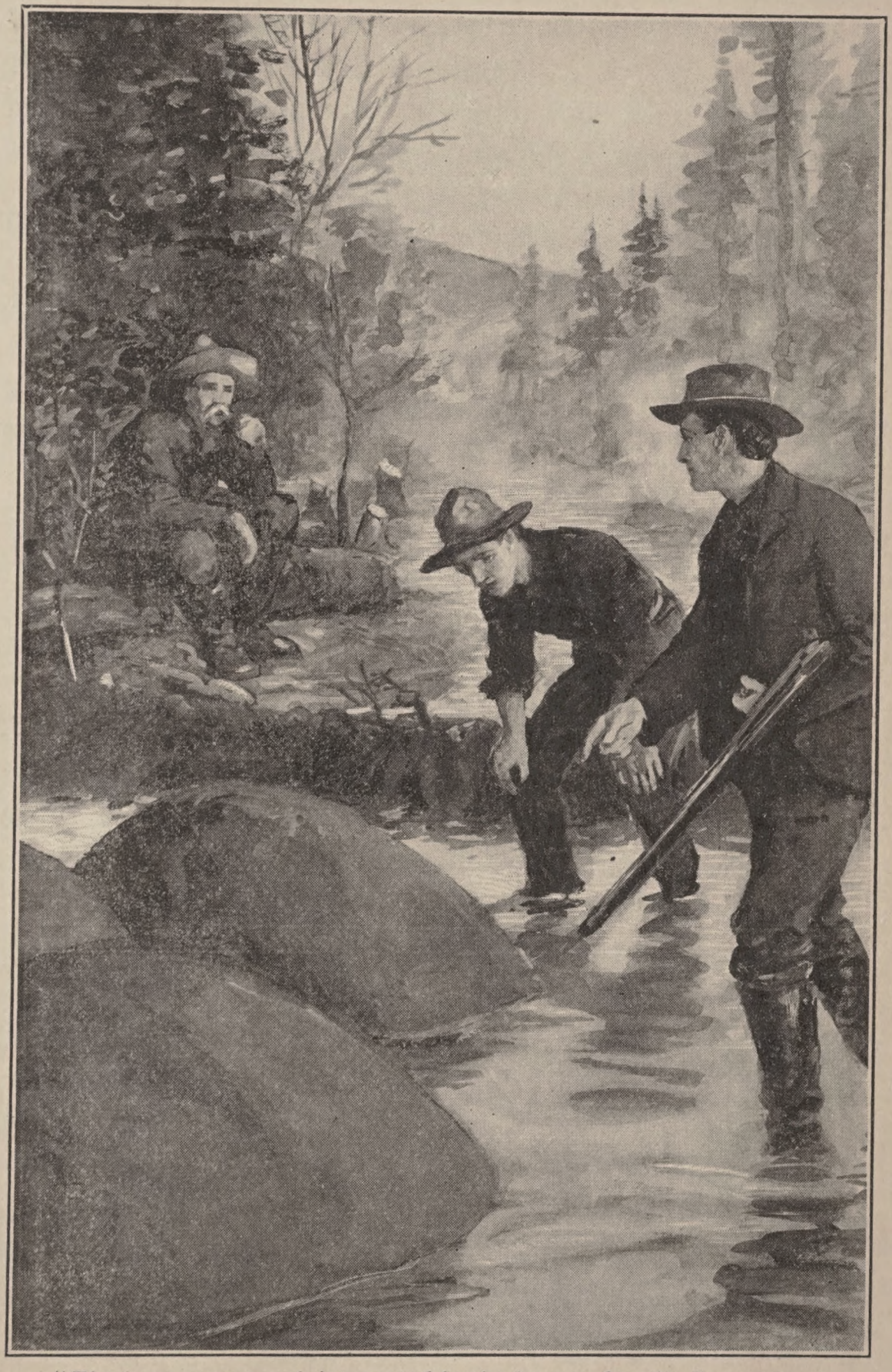
On one occasion the elk had charged, despite the fusilade they poured in upon him, and it was Cuthbert's fate to stumble while endeavoring to wildly spring out of the way, thanks to the breaking of a string connecting his foot with one of his snowshoes.

Before he could recover himself the beast had charged him.

The boy had sense enough to grasp his horns and hold on desperately.

This saved him considerable damage, for the elk was more than knee-deep in the drift, and, while a powerful beast, could not find the means to exert himself fully while this burden dangled from his head like an incubus.

Had Cuthbert been alone he might have had serious trouble about that time.



"The boys were much interested in the beaver dam." See page 34.

Karl quickly discovered, however, that his chum had been unable to beat as successful a retreat as himself, and immediately returned to the spot.

Of course, it only took a single shot from his gun at such close quarters to wind up the elk's career.

Cuthbert was pleased to let go. He had never taken hold of anything that he was so glad to lose again.

On another occasion quite a different adventure befell the two hunters.

This time the elk was a game old fellow whom they had twice hunted and lost, even after he had been wounded.

They knew his tracks through some peculiarity and were rather pleased at the opportunity to be in touch with the clever old rogue again, for it is a trick of human nature to greatly desire those things that are the hardest to get.

Any day they chose, at this time in question, they could have secured an elk by simply going to the yard where the balance of the band still held the fort; but they would rather tramp ten miles after this one lone fellow, who for some reason refused to stay with the rest.

The spirit of true sportsmen always runs in this same channel, seeking to lure the wild and suspicious trout in his isolated haunts, rather than the well-fed product of a preserve.

When the boys had followed this big buck a little while they saw traces of blood upon the snow.

The animal had been wounded. There was a crust upon the surface of the snow, which readily sustained the hunters because of the broad foundation afforded by their snowshoes.

It served the heavy elk much poorer, for he broke through at every jump, cutting his limbs badly.

Undoubtedily this was the fated day when they were to secure their game.

So they sped along through forest aisles and over the elevations, constantly gaining upon the object of their solicitude, as they readily understood from various signs well-known to those who had been brought up, like Karl, upon the prairie.

It was about noon when Karl suddenly came to a halt and held up his hand.

"Hark!" he said.

And Cuthbert, listening, heard strange sounds from just beyond a thick fringe of brush, sounds that unmistakably indicated a combat of some sort.

There were snorts and yelps, together with a threshing, followed by a dull thud, and then more yelps.

"What under the sun can it be?" asked Cuthbert, unable to make it all out.

"I think I can guess," smiled Karl, nodding, as a fresh series of yelps, louder than before, and indicative of pain, came to their ears.

"That sounds like dogs with a bear; but there are no dogs—perhaps it's wolves."

"Yes, wolves, and the old chap we have followed so far is at bay."

A light broke upon Cuthbert.

"Battling for his life against those rascals! I can sympathize with the brave old fellow. But come, let's see what is going on."

He had not forgotten his experience on the open prairie, at the time Karl first made his acquaintance, when so sorely beset by the hungry creatures. That memory must always follow him.

When they had pushed through the brush a strange panorama presented itself to their view.

There was the elk at bay, torn in many places where

the keen teeth of his tormentors had fastened upon him, weakened by his gallant fight, yet with his spirit undermined, shaking his massive horns and meeting each assault as best he could.

It was not altogether a one-sided battle.

Several wolves lay stretched out upon the trampled snow, already dyed in places by their blood, and others were limping about in a very suggestive manner.

They were shrewd enough to avoid the brave old fellow's battle front, and make their assault upon his flanks.

Of course, he was doomed. It could be only a question of time when he must fall.

Somehow the hopeless condition of the elk appealed to the boy's chivalrous nature.

They never saw anything decent about a wolf under the most favorable conditions, and just then he appeared at his worst.

So they looked at each other.

"Shall we lay a few out?" said the expression on Karl's face, and Cuthbert's answering look indicated that he never knew the time when he was averse to knocking wolves on the head.

Accordingly, they took a hand in the unequal combat, and it was wonderful what consternation their coming had upon the cowardly beasts, only made desperate by force of numbers and the fact that hunger forced them to the wall.

The repeating rifles were able to give a good account of themselves before the scampering, demoralized wolves could get beyond range.

"Hurrah!" cried Cuthbert, mentally adding a few nicks to the score he was keeping to balance that old account.

Seven lay there, some quite still, others kicking their

last. Two of these the game old elk could account for, but the rest were their quarry.

Somehow it did Cuthbert an immense amount of good to bring that old account nearer even, although he believed he could never fully wipe it out, try as he would.

"Look out!" cried Karl, suddenly.

Bless you, if the battered old elk hadn't charged, unable to realize that his life had been saved by the coming of these hunters and the good work done by their guns.

There was nothing left to Karl but to fling up his gun and down the old chap with a center shot, as neatly done as Old Sile would have wished.

"I declare! to think of him charging us!" cried Cuthbert, in mingled surprise and chagrin at what he was disposed to look upon as base ingratitude.

Karl laughed.

"Unfortunately the poor old fellow is not given the power of recognizing what a helping hand we loaned him. He looked upon us simply in the light of what we have always been, his mortal foes. Why, doesn't he bear the scar of the wound you gave him? Well, since the wolves left him in such a hurry, he thought he'd have a go at us while the fight was on."

"I suppose he was flushed with pride and thought he had chased the critters off."

"Very probably so."

"That was a clean score, Karl," bending down to see where the lead went home.

"I never made a better shot, and hope I may be able to repeat it again."

"Too bad."

"What is?"

"That he forced our hand and compelled us to shoot him. The brave old fellow deserved to live after putting up such a game fight."

"He certainly did, but I reckon it wouldn't have made much difference."

"What d'ye mean, Karl?"

"We should have been in mercy compelled to finish him. Look how he has been torn. Weakened by loss of blood, he would never have escaped from those savage wolves. They will follow a wounded stag for a week if necessary, but are dead certain to pull him at last."

"I guess you're right, Karl. You always are; but, all the same, I'm sorry he couldn't have lived. That was a glorious sight to remember. I've seen it on paper more than once, but the actual reality far surpasses the best steel engraving ever printed."

That feeling of honoring a worthy foe was nothing to be ashamed of, and did Cuthbert's chivalrous nature great credit. It stamped him a true Southerner in the best sense of that word.

Wolfskins were getting to be quite numerous in their collection, but Cuthbert secretly had an idea they could never manage to secure too many of these trophies of the chase. Indeed, he was quite insatiable in this regard.

The old elk was a pretty tough proposition when it came to utilizing his carcass, so that, after all, the "varmints" got the major portion of him, Karl only selecting a few of the choice bits which would make a good stew.

As for Cuthbert, he never did fancy elk meat, somehow, and yearned for tender antelope, such as they had become accustomed to on the plains.

Old Sile tried them once on beaver steak, but they were unanimously of the opinion that, while it might be deemed fair provender by some, it must be hard times indeed before they would care to accept it as regular rations.

It is astonishing what inroads three rifles can make upon the game of a certain section when kept everlast-

ingly at it for five months, especially when backed up by a series of traps that have been cunningly set for business.

While the deep snow lasted new game could hardly be expected to migrate and the depleted supply was not reinforced, so that presently the prairie chums and their captain were obliged to considerably widen the circuit of their trapping zone.

This necessitated a longer tramp, so that an earlier start must be made.

The novelty had worn off.

With Cuthbert the monetary value of the peltries counted as naught, since he had a superabundance of the filthy lucre.

Karl kept it up with Old Sile because he never liked to let go of a thing, and, besides, it meant something to the veteran to bring down a goodly stock of furs in the spring, since this perquisite was to be his own.

So it happened that Cuthbert was frequently left alone at the camp while the others spent the day making the rounds of the traps, sometimes bringing home fresh meat in addition to the skins captured.

On these occasions Cuthbert usually busied himself cutting wood, being now a fair hand with the axe, though once he came very near having a serious accident, being lamed, as it were, for a week and hobbling around by the use of a home-made cane.

Then he tried fishing under the ice with the spear, and picked up quite a few trout that lay in the deep water of the pond holes.

And it was while upon one of these little side excursions that our Virginia boy underwent another experience worth relating.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BEAR THAT WENT FISHING.

The backbone of winter had been broken, as Old Sile expressed it.

That was to say, they would have no more long-continued, steady, bitter weather, such as January had presented.

Of course, there would be cold and storm, plenty of snow, and perhaps the most severe drops of mercury during the whole season, but they could expect mild days between, when the surface of the snow would melt, to be frozen like glass at night.

It was during one of these little thaws that Cuthbert conceived the idea of making another try for trout.

He had never before caught this game fish in winter, and it seemed out of all reason that the trout had not secreted themselves as usual, under rocks and stumps, to remain until early spring, but there they were, as their presence on the camp table abundantly testified.

Another thing gave Cuthbert rather a cruel wrench.

He counted himself a true sportsman, and believed in capturing game when possible after such methods as seemed just and fair in the eyes of the craft.

It therefore went somewhat against his grain to spear trout. In some Eastern States such a thing would be an offense against the law.

They must have them to eat, however, and, as no one could induce them to bite at such bait as they had to offer, Cuthbert put aside his scruples and went into the affair with his ordinary vim.

He had the usual boy's faculty for throwing his whole heart into his sport.

Usually success attended his efforts, for he was a poor loser, and disdained to give up a game until he had literally exhausted every possible chance.

On the day in question Cuthbert had been baffled at the old stand, where he had up to this time never failed to take toll.

For some reason or other, the trout appeared to have abandoned the spot.

No doubt the weather was to blame, for fish are affected by it more than by any other cause.

Cuthbert knew there were still any amount of trout in the pond, because he had seen them on his last visit, and the creek was frozen so solidly in places that they could not have escaped.

Certain scratches on the ice attracted his attention, and then a light broke upon him.

Some animal had been out here, attempting to scoop the trout out of the hole, or fish for them in some ingenious manner known to his craft. Whether he had secured a mess or not was an unfathomable mystery, but at any rate he had succeeded in scaring the timid fish from that hole.

There were others.

Cuthbert had located several, and, having brought along the axe for just such an emergency, he straightway proceeded to make the ice-chips fly.

By the time he had his hole cut through he had frightened away what fish there might have been in the immediate vicinity, and was compelled to await their return.

His time he utilized by passing over to the old hole, where he picked up several trophies, the trout having wandered thither when disturbed at the new place.

Cuthbert had an idea—a very old one, known among

all boys who skate. He began to pound upon the ice in the neighborhood of the other deep places where he had reason to believe the fish congregated, but studiously avoided the openings he meant to work.

It panned out famously.

The trout gathered in squads and companies within reach of his pole.

All he had to do was to drop his spear in and pull it out, when usually it held a flapping prize on the delicate prongs.

Evidently they were in for a spread, and this time no one would be able to complain that the trout offered only a taste.

Steadily his pile increased.

When they began to grow scarce at the one hole he stepped over to the other, and plied his spear with the same good will.

There was not a great deal of sport in such work, nothing like what the old Indian in the Columbia River country would experience, perched among the ragged rocks above some wild torrent, ready to thrust his spear into some lordly salmon that pushed its way up against the streaming current to spawn.

All the same, it was for the pot, and with this Cuthbert had to rest content.

He was so engrossed in his work that he paid no attention to anything else for the time being.

It was only when the trout began to come up few and far between that he bethought himself of the fact that there was such a thing as enough.

He did not want to be a trout hog.

Besides, his arm was not made of steel, and this constant exercise had a tendency to weary the flesh.

Now, to gather his trophies, string them upon several prongs from a branch, and saunter home to surprise the

others with a treat when they returned weary and hungry at nightfall.

Hello!

Cuthbert had a little surprise coming as he rested his tired arms and cast an involuntary glance around the pond.

He had thought himself the only fisher on the ice, but in this it seems he made a mistake.

As his roving glance ranged in the quarter of the other hole, he discovered a moving object.

No need to examine it closely to tell what it might be.

It was a bear, a small grizzly, the same animal, no doubt, responsible for the many scratches seen on the ice.

He had come out of his winter retreat prematurely, and was evidently possessed of an appetite that demanded attention.

Cuthbert was not only startled, he was annoyed.

To stand by and see those sweet little trout which he had captured at such an expenditure of time and muscle disappearing down the maw of that audacious bear was irritating, to say the least.

It made his anger rise.

He simply would not stand it.

Then came the thought of revenge.

What could he do?

Unfortunately, his rifle lay close to where the miserable marauder munched at his delicate feast, Cuthbert having laid it down when commencing operations.

To attack the beast with only a little fish spear would have been folly, in short, criminal, since it invited death.

Cuthbert had not forgotten how his flesh crept when he examined the terrible claws of those grizzlies killed up in the ravine at the bears' den. Perhaps this was the one that got away on that occasion. At any rate, he looked an ugly customer, if not of enormous bulk.

Well, that first pile of fish could be counted on as gone. If only he could save the rest and manage to obtain some satisfaction from the gluttonous robber.

Keeping his eye on Bruin, he began to hastily gather his spoils ready to run if the beast began to shamble his way.

By quick work he managed to make sure of his spoils, and then moved away over the ice so as to pass around the bear.

Cuthbert had left a few of the smaller trout as a bait which sooner or later might lure the animal to the second hole.

This move would leave the first opening unguarded, and consequently his rifle might be regained, this being his first object.

Bruin growled a little as he walked off, and Cuthbert's heart was in his throat for fear he should take a notion to start in pursuit.

If, however, the bear cherished any notion of getting even with one who had robbed him of a family, he cared more for the feast he had found ready spread, and continued to gulp down the few remaining trophies of Cuthbert's skill with the spear.

The boy felt deep resentment against such unmannerly treatment.

He now had a chance to go home with more than half his catch, enough for a square meal all around, apparently; but this he absolutely refused to do.

His rifle lay there on the ice, and he was desirous of securing it.

Besides, after such treatment he felt that something on the aggressive order was expected of him.

When he had made a half circuit and come up behind the bear, he stood still to see what the latter would do,

meanwhile hanging his fish upon the branch of a pine tree by the aid of the spear.

What next?

Would Bruin shuffle off the ice, quite satisfied with what he had eaten?

Well, Cuthbert was not very familiar with the ways of grizzlies, but he rather guessed this was just what the fellow would not do as long as there remained a chance to pick up another one of those delicious trout.

Should he come toward him Cuthbert meant to climb a tree.

Ah! the beast was nosing around, endeavoring to get on the track of another feast.

His nose was in the air, it pointed toward the second hole—really the sense of smell must be abnormally developed in these animals.

It was in this one, at least, and to his injury.

Cuthbert kept pace with him, advancing just as fast the bear did.

When Bruin reached the second hole the boy was not far away from the first.

His gun lay there in plain sight, not where he had left it, but on the edge of the hole. Bruin having contemptuously knocked it aside while nosing around for more fish.

To reach it Cuthbert was compelled to advance still closer to his enemy.

He waited until the other busied himself with the few small fish left as a bait to attract his attention, and then, subduing his troubled heart as best he could, Cuthbert glided forward with outstretched hand.

It was a critical moment.

Even had the bear turned and advanced upon him with fierce aspect he was determined that nothing would prevent him from securing the firearm now that he was so very near its location.

The rascal did growl menacingly, proving that he was aware of human presence; but those toothsome trout, how could he desert them to pay any attention to a biped?

And when the lad's eager fingers drew the Winchester into his clutch, he heaved a sigh of huge relief, proving that the suspense had been truly awful.

What a change came over him with the possession of the gun!

He seemed to lose much of his dread concerning those awful claws, so prized by the Indians as to stamp their possessor a brave without fear or reproach.

Should he fire now?

Cuthbert was not usually cautious, but by degrees his nature had begun to take on something in this line, thanks to the constant intercourse with long-headed Karl.

He looked behind.

It was just as well that he should know how far he would have to run.

The woods lay something like twenty yards away. The bear was less than ten from where he stood.

If he fired and by some misadventure only wounded or angered Bruin, the chances the other would come upon him ere he could cover that distance and pull himself up into a pine tree.

Better risk a longer shot, in order to make sure of his retreat.

Wise Cuthbert! There was yet hope of his becoming a great Nimrod. His life on the plains and among the lodges of the Sioux had done wonders for him already.

So he backed away a dozen paces or more, and then brought up for business.

Now to send his compliments to the shaggy trout thief, and give him his dues.

The bear had finished his repast.

He sat there sniffing the air or licking his chops, Cuth-

bert could not say which; but at any rate he offered a fair target, and our young friend accepted the chance.

Was he too hasty in firing, or did the bear move just as he pulled the trigger?

It mattered little.

The thing that concerned him most of all was the fact that the bear had started for him, floundering over the ice in a manner that was hardly suggestive of serious impediments in the shape of wounds.

Cuthbert was well aware of the fact that just then time was very valuable, and that seconds counted as never before.

He had not taken his gun down from his shoulder save to pump another cartridge into the chamber, and hence was able to send a second shot after the first, and follow this up by a third, with but a breath between.

Each time he scored, as the roar of the advancing beast declared, but somehow his lead did not seem to lodge where it could do the most good.

At any rate, the sturdily-built beast came swarming on, bristling with rage and mindful of nothing save the desire to overhaul the party to whom he owed his hurt.

Whether Cuthbert cared to remain and fight it out, or run away so that he might live to do battle another day, the thing was taken out of his hands by circumstances.

The mechanism of his repeating rifle failed to properly work—in his excitement he had clogged the empty shell or something on that order, which rendered the gun useless until he could give it a little attention.

That settled it.

To remain and welcome the grizzly there on the open ice might have pleased some reckless spirits, but, as for Cuthbert, he was ready to decline the privilege.

So he turned and put for the shore, with the grizzly sliding and scratching in full pursuit.

Cuthbert made good time.

Now he had reason to bless his foresight in actually selecting the tree which would afford him the best shelter, for he could make a bee-line for it and mount in hot haste.

He persisted in holding on to his gun, and this delayed his climbing business enough to give the bear a chance to come up, rear upon his hind legs and make a desperate, although unsuccessful, attempt to seize hold of his moccasined feet.

Indeed, it was a close shave, for the fellow's claws actually tore the colored porcupine quill ornament on the side of his footgear.

Cuthbert was visibly alarmed when he saw the angry beast make as though he would clamber up into the tree after him; but he had been assured by Old Sile that, unlike his black cousin, the grizzly bear never mounts a tree; and presently his enemy gave up the idea, ceased his savage growls, and fell to licking several wounds where the bullets had started the blood flowing.

This gave the beleaguered lad the opportunity he desired to examine his gun.

Unless he could remedy the mishap he was evidently doomed to remain in the tree until nightfall, or at least such time as his comrades might come to the relief.

Surely, the prospect was anything but bright to an ambitious hunter.

The chagrin of failing to drop his game with three shots was bad enough, but to be treed in this style was disgraceful in the eyes of a proud Virginian.

All was not yet lost.

He might remedy the trouble with his gun. Once before had the same thing happened through his own fault,

and he could give a pretty good guess what was the matter.

While Bruin licked his wounds and growled his displeasure, mingled with obvious threats as to what he would do in case the cause of his trouble came within reach, Cuthbert turned his attention to the weapon.

A cursory examination showed him where the difficulty lay—that if he could only succeed in pushing back the cartridge the clogged mechanism would be free to act.

To that end he applied himself.

Once or twice while he thus labored he shot a curious glance down in the direction where his four-footed guard held forth.

He sincerely hoped Mr. Grizzly was a good sticker, and would not give up the game, because he had thus far received so little satisfaction out of it.

Cuthbert could promise a further continuance of warm favors if only he would remain on duty, and the blessed old gun could be gotten into working order.

Indeed, he had literally carried Old Sile's sage advice into extremes, and was so well loaded down with ammunition that, once started, he could turn the grizzly's carcass into a lead mine if need be.

The first time he took a survey he found that the bear had ceased to whine and lick his cuts, but was sitting up, apparently sniffing the air.

Which was strange, Cuthbert thought, since he was perched in plain sight, and Bruin could have no trouble about discovering his location.

The second time he looked down he realized how matters stood. The grizzly was no longer directly underneath him, but had gone to an adjoining tree, where he stood on his hind legs and appeared to be reaching zeal-

ously for something that was just tantalizingly beyond his grasp.

Ah! again those fish.

Cuthbert remembered thrusting the two strings on his spear and lodging them in the branches of a pine.

The bear's sense of smell had located the prize, and he was after them.

It was really comical to see how he strained to gather in the prized trophies, nor did he seem in the least astonished to find such peculiar fruit growing on a common pine.

Even a bear may be a philosopher, and take the favors of fortune just as they come.

This sight stirred Cuthbert up again, especially when he saw the strings of fish swaying, as though Bruin had struck the lower part.

Already the greedy brute had eaten half of the products of his hard labor. Was he to let him complete the job?

Perish the thought.

Accordingly, he gave a shout to attract the beast's attention, and made as if about to descend the tree, which action, of course, brought the scamp limping to the spot with such an eager expression on his shrewd face that Cuthbert laughed most heartily.

His object had been accomplished, however, since there was a temporary abandonment of the forage design on Bruin's part.

Three times did the lad thus raise a false alarm and bring his guard, complaining, to the foot of the tree, which he scratched and gnawed the while, as if to indicate what was in store for a fellow of Cuthbert's size if ever he had the chance to let himself out.

By slow degrees the work on the gun was accomplished, and success now seemed reasonably certain.

The bear had about determined not to pay any more attention to him, but devote his entire energies toward getting the fish.

Constant batting them to and fro must, sooner or later, have caused a downfall.

Luckily Cuthbert was ready with his gun before this came about.

When he had the mechanism once more in proper working order, he made sure to fill the magazine, so that he could count on its full capacity, eight shots in all.

Then he looked at his watch and found it just a little after three. The bear's hour had come.

At such close quarters it was no great feat to down the long-haired pirate, and Cuthbert made no boast over the shot that concluded the business.

Rather, he felt chagrined, because he had fired three times point blank at the beast when upon the ice with wretched results.

Upon figuring up matters, he concluded that the grizzly was, after all, a fair balance for the trout he had devoured.

There were more in the pond that could be taken if he thought he lacked in quantity; but when he counted his string he found he had all he cared to dress for supper, and if the rest of the party wanted more they would have to come after them personally.

It is not every one going trouting who can bag a big bear, and Cuthbert was conscious of a certain amount of pride in his heart as he stalked homeward, his fish dangling from the end of his shouldered rifle.

Old Sile took the lantern after supper, and, with his gun on his arm, went through the woods to help Cuthbert slip off the grizzly's jacket and carry that trophy of the chase back to camp as a memento of the fishing bear.

CHAPTER XII.

AN INVASION OF THE WOLVES.

As a general thing boys tire of even a pleasure when it has been repeated many times and long for a change, while the older a man grows the more contented does he become with his lot should his lines fall in pleasant places.

Knowing this weakness of youth, Old Sile was secretly pleased to see that his two wards did not seem to exhibit any restlessness along this order.

They never wearied of praising the comforts of the old dugout.

Had it been a palace they could not have appeared more satisfied.

And then, even the monotony of the life seemed to possess an indescribable charm for them. When approaching the marked spot where a trap had been set, there was always a sensation of uncertainty as to whether it had caught a victim, and the satisfaction of outwitting the keenest animals in all creation, sly Reynards of the woods.

Then the hunts were usually rewarded with game of some sort.

On the whole, it was a season of constant surprises, a stretch of adventure that could not be forgotten by either of the lads, no matter what scenes of excitement the veiled future might have in store for them.

To Cuthbert there was always a mysterious charm about the great forest.

Whether it was summer, when the birds sang in the leafy trees, or in autumn, with the coloring of the leaves, the falling of nuts and the sad voices that told of an-

other season's ending, or in the dead of winter, when the bleak winds whistled mournfully athwart the bushy tops of the sentinel pines, and the clinging snow made ghosts of the giant trees, it was all the same; he loved the woods above everything else.

The prairie was grand, but monotonous, while the forest presented the many changes of a kaleidoscope, and appealed to his Virginian heart.

Taken in all, the season must be set down as a grand success.

What discomforts fell to their lot were soon forgotten, while the pleasures would long haunt their memories.

It had been arranged that when the camp in Paradise Valley was broken up in the spring, Karl was to accompany his chum East, and see something there that he had always yearned after—the great ocean.

They would pass the summer at Cuthbert's old home, taking jaunts in various directions, even into Canada for a spell of salmon fishing, returning by way of Niagara Falls.

In the early autumn preparations could be made for their long-projected visit across the border to old Mexico, land of the Aztec and the Montezumas, region of romance and adventure, there to see what life on a truly Southern cattle ranch was like, with *vaqueros* taking the places of cowboys.

There is, perhaps, more enjoyment in the anticipation of such projects than may even be secured from their realization.

The otters had all been taken.

Beaver were scarce, and Old Sile was of the opinion that it would be well to leave a few of the broad-tails for stocking purposes.

Their elk yard was a thing of the past, the remaining

animals having taken a notion to vamose when a favorable stretch of weather gave them the opportunity.

And game was getting very scarce, indeed, owing to the unusually protracted winter.

Old Sile began to grow a little serious.

Their provisions had been reduced to rather a low ebb; true, they had plenty of coffee, tea, and such things, but the substantials had gone at an amazing rate.

Old Sile had possibly not counted upon the voracious appetities of two half-grown chaps, who were ready for five meals a day, and always as hungry as wolves between times.

The old ranger began to save meat that earlier in the season they would have thrown to the winds.

Still the keen cold held sway, and it seemed as though there was never to be summer more.

Up in the polar regions it could not have kept up a more constant icy spell.

With the axe they managed to secure all the wood that was necessary, but it kept one or the other busy; in fact, the homekeeper did little else save chop and hew.

Old Sile declared it beat his time.

He had never experienced such Arctic weather so late in the season, and hinted at all manner of remarkable things having happened to the sun, though the boys only laughed at his croakings.

With the usual carelessness of youth, they were quite willing to let the universe go on in its own way, and not concern themselves over the doings of things they could not remedy.

And the wolves, starved out of their mountain fastnesses, came down into the valley hunting in packs like wild dogs.

Never had they been so bold, hovering about the camp,

scratching at the door at nights, and howling in unison while the hours of darkness lasted.

Cuthbert had at last wearied of dropping the gaunt creatures.

When he was in camp he dared not leave the door open five minutes, lest some venturesome animal should sneak in and steal their last remaining piece of dried meat, which could not be hung up high enough to be out of their reach.

Absolute hunger will make an animal do the most astonishing acrobatic feats.

One evening they had an apt illustration of this, that created quite a furor while it lasted.

Old Sile was cooking supper, while the tired boys sat around the fire, resting.

The odor of frying meat was certainly very appetizing, and must have been tantalizing to any hungry creature debarred from the feast, reducing such to a pitch of desperation.

At least, the wolfish chorus without seemed to be more noisy than ever, and once a pair of glowing eyes actually looked in upon them through the little window, whereupon Karl pulled the cord that closed the wooden shutter.

They were in the midst of eating, and feeling very comfortable, indeed, because of the warmth around them and the savory dinner that had been provided, when suddenly a great scratching was heard, accompanied by fearful yelps.

Old Sile looked up, for the dropping of charred wood gave him a pretty good idea as to where the source of the trouble was located.

He was just in time to see a struggling form come whirling and scratching down the ample chimney, accompanied by a shower of *débris*.

Plump into the fire fell Mr. Wolf, whereupon more

howls broke forth, and, with a mad leap, he left his uncomfortable quarters.

In his passage he knocked Old Sile over, and created quite a little excitement, running hither and thither, singed and smoking, and just as wild to get out as he had before been to get in.

"Wal, I declar to Moses!" sung out the old ranger, scrambling to his knees, "this beats my time all holler. They've took to the chimbly, by hookey—they're a-comin' in on us. Look out for that critter, boys; don't let him get his teeth in ye. He's as mad as a March hare, an' it's dangerous bein' hit by a wolf in that ere condition. Who's got a gun?"

Karl was nearest the rack.

He had snatched up a heavy pine knot upon discovering the savage nature of their strange visitor, and this he held ready for business.

At Sile's words he started to move toward the guns. The wolf was running up and down the side of the cabin, snarling like a hyena, and acting as though possessed of a demon.

Of course, he suspected that Karl's movement boded him no good, and, with the fury that even a rat at bay will display, he leaped directly at the lad.

Old Sile gave a whoop, and hurled the frying-pan at the savage beast, but though it made a great clatter against the wall, it did not bring the wolf to a halt.

Karl, fortunately, was ready with his pine knot upraised. No star batter ever met an inshoot with greater success than this cowboy of the plains showed when he whirled his impromptu bat toward that springing beast.

There was a deep, suggestive thud, a half-smothered yelp, and the animal went back in a heap against the door.

"That's a home run!" shouted Cuthbert, on his knees,

an eager witness of the remarkable engagement in which he had no part.

Karl did not wait for another opportunity to test his batting qualities.

He knew the wolf was scotched, not killed, and, given a few seconds of time in which to recover, would once more endeavor to vent his mad humor on his human adversary.

Perhaps on the second occasion Karl might not be so fortunate in selecting a fair ball, and the animal find a chance to use his teeth.

Karl ran no chances.

The guns were within reach of his eager hands, and he lost no time in snatching the nearest from the wooden pegs.

Then it was all up with the wretched beast, for Karl potted him without compunction, and watched his expiring kicks with the air of one who had obeyed the call of duty.

Old Sile was now laughing in his peculiar way, while rubbing the back of his head where it had come in contact with the hard ground.

"That's a new experience, boys—I've been through considerable in my time, but bless me if I ever seen a wolf come tumblin' down through a chimbly afore," he said, looking up as though expecting a second visit.

"Then we'll have to go to bed with our guns and sleep on our arms after this," declared Cuthbert, in a dismayed tone.

"Oh! it'll be a regular thing now to jump up half-a-dozen times a night, kill a wolf or two in the shanty, chuck 'em out, an' go to sleep again," said Old Sile, soberly.

"For my part, I don't believe the critter ever meant to come in," declared Cuthbert, stoutly.

"What makes ye think that, lad?" with a quizzical gleam in his eye.

"Because no wolf cares to drop into a bed of red-hot coals, and that fellow was so badly scared by his experience that he went, as you said, stark, raving mad."

"I believe ye are about right—p'raps he was jest a-leanin' over the ole stump above, smellin' the meat we cooked below, when somethin' gave way an' he fell in. I reckon we've kinder burnt the stump out durin' the winter, an' I'll have to take a look at it in the mornin'."

The excitement having subsided, Karl threw the lean wolf outside, where his hungry compatriots would pay their respects to him, and it was not long ere the snarling of a congregation told of his fate. A few polished bones in the morning would be all that remained of the adventurous intruder.

Supper was resumed where it had been left off, and many were the jokes made upon this singular interruption.

This sudden and terrifying descent of the wolf had made a deep impression on Cuthbert, whose feelings toward the breed of animals were already of the liveliest nature.

He could not keep from casting more than a few apprehensive glances up at the yawning opening that served them as a chimney, and in imagination saw the scintillating orbs of other eager wolves encircling the burned-out stump, as though ready to follow the daring example of their leader.

He also kept his gun within reach, nor did the others make any remark about such plain signs of nervousness.

Cuthbert was, after all, new to these conditions. He had borne himself thus far with commendable valor, and they knew how he came to be particularly averse to the wolf tribe.

Besides, the sight of that gaunt creature, dropping from the heavens, apparently, and scattering the fire as he plunged out of its hot embrace, was quite enough to startle one possessed of even greater nerve than Cuthbert.

Old Sile promised to so arrange the opening in the morning that, while still available for their purpose, it could not be used by hungry animals as a road to Kingdom Come.

That closed the incident, but it often came up during their subsequent suppers, and Cuthbert somehow could not restrain his hand from creeping toward his gun on such occasions.

When he was left as caretaker at the dugout, and had to go a little distance off to chop wood, he found that it was necessary even then to carry his gun along, for there seemed to be no limit to the audacity of the prowling beasts.

Cuthbert threatened to call it Wolf Roost.

He declared they were that sly they could reason out the chances they took, and knew whether a man was armed or not.

For instance, while they usually skulked around, keeping well out of sight when he had his gun, let him go without it and the beasts appeared imbued with an audacity that bordered on depravity.

This was partticularly impressed upon the boy's mind one day when, chopping away merrily enough, he chanced to look up and there, sure enough, was a gaunt wolf seated on his haunches and surveying him with an eager, hungry look, while his red tongue lolled from his mouth in a manner that made the wood-chopper shiver.

For his gun was in the cabin!

He raised the axe and shouted, but the wolf only stood up and snarled.

Then Cuthbert, impetuous as usual, made a rush at the beast.

The wolf did not await his coming, but only skulked off a dozen feet, when, Cuthbert having come to a stop, it again sat down to watch him.

This made the boy angry.

"We'll see whether you do," he cried, for the whole attitude of the expected beast indicated that he would not be averse to picking the bones of this sweet morsel that had so long been tantalizingly within reach.

With that Cuthbert began a counter movement toward the house.

He never dreamed but that the wolf would hang off, keeping beyond his reach.

To his surprise, the gaunt chap trotted around so as to come between the boy and the cabin, as though aware of the fact that if Cuthbert ever reached this latter place his cake would be all dough.

"Confound the scamp; I believe he means to tackle me rather than let me get where my gun lies," was the conclusion the young woodsman reached when he saw the beast's really defiant attitude.

And this was just what the wolf meant.

Luckily he was alone. Had there been a pack within call, Cuthbert's situation must have been desperate, indeed. Perhaps he might have been forced to the humiliating extreme of climbing a tree.

Axe in hand he advanced sturdily upon the defiant beast.

The wolf snarled menacingly and showed his white teeth back of his drawn lips.

Cuthbert had no desire for a combat at close quarters with such an ugly customer.

Was there any other way in which he could dislodge

him, or was it possible to make a half circuit around, so as to reach the cabin?

He started a flank movement.

Immediately the wise old pirate changed his base, and the situation was as before.

When Cuthbert had made three separate attempts without success, he realized that he could not hope to get out of the affair without a scrimmage, as Old Sile would call it.

Accordingly he loosened the knife in his belt, took a firm hold upon the axe, and then, muttering the most tremendous whoops of which his young lungs were capable, rushed upon the determined guard.

Even this fervid display failed to make his enemy turn tail and run.

Desperation had apparently worked that wolf up to the highest notch, and he was bent upon having a meal or knowing the reason why.

An axe is a terrible weapon when one can strike home with the keen edge, but a miss opens the wielder to attack.

This Cuthbert found to his cost.

He meant to end the battle almost before it had begun, with his first sweeping stroke; but either miscalculated the distance or else the beast dodged, for the axe only cleft the air until it struck against a tree trunk.

The wolf, strange to say, instead of leaping on him at once, closed its jaws on the helve of the axe.

This favored the lad, giving him a chance to recover himself, and struggle for possession of the weapon.

If he ever thought of dropping the axe and making a run for it, he knew such a thing would be the height of folly, since the wolf must overtake him ere he had covered one-quarter of the distance to the dugout.

Besides, it was not in the nature of a Virginian to turn his back on a foe in this way.

It must be a fight to a finish.

The wolf was gaunt, but doubtless possessed of such strength as is given to his species.

Besides, he was fighting in a sort of desperation, taunted by gnawing hunger and the prospect of a glorious feast within his reach.

Altogether it was a scene for an artist, that valiant lad struggling so gallantly with a big mountain wolf, whose hot breath was often on his cheeks as he fought.

The beast clung tenaciously to the handle of the axe, as though the possession of the sinews of war meant success or failure, which it certainly did in this case.

Cuthbert began to grow alarmed.

What if he should become exhausted in the struggle, the beast would overwhelm him.

There was his hunting knife as opposed to those cruel teeth.

He snatched it out, determined to give the beast his death-wound.

The glint of steel must have transmitted something of a nervous shock to his hairy antagonist, for the wolf let go his hold upon the axe helve and jumped back, still ugly and snarling and unsubdued.

Again Cuthbert moved upon the enemy's works, and now he kept his eyes fastened on those wicked orbs of the wolf, remembering how difficult it is for any four-footed creature to withstand the human gaze.

This thing had been only a theory with him up to now, when the necessities of the case compelled him to put it into practice.

It required considerable nerve to thus advance upon

so ferocious an antagonist, and perhaps Cuthbert might not have done it had the road to the cabin door been free.

Necessity often compels us to be heroes even against our will.

The short hair along the neck and shoulders of the animal bristled on end, and his snarls were something to haunt future dreams, yet Cuthbert halted not, advancing step by step, his eyes fastened upon the orbs of his lupine adversary, one hand gripping the axe, while the other brandished aloft that gleaming weapon whose shimmering blade seemed to make the wolf loth to meet the attack.

Step by step, back toward the cabin.

It was the mastery of mind over matter.

Had Cuthbert removed his gaze but a single second the beast would doubtless have made a fierce lunge for his throat, but somehow he could not do it while thus impaled upon that stern glance.

Now the front of the shanty slowly loomed up. Cuthbert could see it in the range of his vision, even while he dared not remove his eyes from the glaring orbs he held in submission.

Nearer still—the end was close at hand.

The wolf's spirit began to break. Perhaps a consciousness of his defeat overwhelmed him. At any rate his snarls seemed to be transformed into whines, and the bristles along his spine no longer stood stiffly erect like the fretful quills upon a porcupine.

Game to the last, he would not turn tail and gallop out of sight.

Cuthbert had now come within a dozen feet of the door.

He knew the time had arrived to make or break, and,

giving another fierce whoop, such as the cowboy life had taught him, he charged the enemy again.

This time the wolf did not await his coming, but backed water.

True he only retreated a dozen paces, and then, as though ashamed to show the white feather, once more turned to face his foe.

It was too late to retrieve the lost advantage, for Cuthbert had vanished.

Never did quarter-back, hugging the ball in his arms, sprint toward goal with more frenzied eagerness than Cuthbert plunged in the direction of that cabin door as soon as the coast was apparently clear.

He struck it with such violence that the wooden button which temporarily held it on the inside, and which could be manipulated from without by means of a cord, was driven from its moorings and sent spinning to the opposite side of the room, while the young fellow measured his full length on the hard earthen floor.

Hardly was he down before he scrambled to his feet again, for an unpleasant sight kept itself before his mental vision, that of the audacious wolf following him in, to leap upon his back as he lay there.

One had even entered by means of the chimney, what was to prevent another from taking advantage of the open door?

How eagerly Cuthbert reached for his gun, and never had it felt so full of promise as when he grasped it now.

A great wave of relief swept over him, a wonderful change from the haggard feeling of a short time before.

"Ah! my old buccaneer, I reckon your name is Dennis now," he laughed, hoarsely, as he stepped out of the door; but the discreet wolf, having played his hand for

all it was worth, had vanished in the woods, where even a search failed to disclose him, so that when the others came home all Cuthbert had to prove his wonderful story was the plain print of the wolf's teeth upon the hickory axe helve.

CHAPTER XIII.

TATTERS SOUNDS THE ALARM.

There was one thing, at least, that had given Old Sile much solid satisfaction. From the time when Caleb Cross and his dark-visaged Mexican ally, defeated in their sinister purpose, shook the dust of Paradise Valley from their feet, there had been discovered no sign of intruders up to the present.

For months the whole region belonged to the little hunting party just as much as if they were the only people on earth.

It was even better than the veteran could have hoped for.

Nevertheless, he never once relaxed his eternal vigilance, but was constantly on the alert for signs of strangers, knowing full well that such coming would mean danger to them.

Those vast solitudes, how Cuthbert learned to love them in all their wonderful beauty, with the interlaced branches above, covered with snow, forming a delicate frost-work against the blue sky—the tree trunks standing out like grim black giants in all this world of whiteness.

He could easily imagine what grandeur it must present in the summer, when a carpet of moss lay under foot, the birds caroled in the tree tops, the plash and gentle murmur of the stream ran like a lullaby, and the warm breeze sighed through the bushy pine tops.

At such a time, however, it was probable some Indian camp would be pitched near Paradise Valley, and

the charm of the scene must be broken when these dusky sons of the wilderness took to scouring the vicinity.

Cuthbert knew what an Indian village meant, and had seen all he cared to of the picturesque, but very dirty collection of tepees. He would rather some other fellow had the experience next time.

After his strange adventure with that most determined son of Belial, clothed in a wolf skin, who had made so positive a bid for a jolly dinner, Cuthbert was more than a little nervous regarding the whole lupine tribe.

He had received more of a shock than he cared to admit to the others, and from that time forward it would have been hard to find Cuthbert divorced from his gun.

When he crawled into his bunk he even kept it where he could reach it by stretching out his hand.

There was method in his madness.

When the varmints had taken to coming down the chimney, anything seemed within the range of possibility.

Old Sile had tinkered with the stump that served as a smoke outlet above the dugout hearth, and he assured the youngsters that it was impregnable to the attack of any beast, however cunning.

Winter was finally breaking up.

The sun felt warmer, and sometimes about the middle of the day, when on the south side of the cabin, it was pleasant to bask in the cheery rays, dreaming of the pleasant events of their life on the cattle ranch.

As yet no general thaw had set in, but it would be along ere a great while.

Then the snow would melt, the creek run bank full, and the valley take on a new dress strangely at variance with the pure white garb to which they had become so

accustomed, and which held so great and indescribable a charm for them.

Perhaps neither of the boys would be sorry. They had grown a little weary of the life, for, after all, it was very monotonous to such lively natures.

Besides, they lacked the powerful incentive to gain that would send men to even more remote and lonely distances than this valley, and cheer them through many months of winter.

Yes, taken in all, the boys were ready to confess frankly enough that, while they had most certainly enjoyed themselves tremendously with Old Sile—while they entertained a genuine affection for the old dugout that in memory would often carry them back again to its cozy interior, still they would welcome the day when camp was to be broken and the swift voyage to the Big Horn commenced.

There was little more to do.

The traps yielded but small profit, no matter how cunningly Old Sile set them.

When the game was not there it could hardly be expected that they would make a heavy haul.

By degrees the veteran was shortening his circuit and closing his season.

Each day he brought in some unprofitable trap and hung it with the rest.

The skins taken during the season were all gone over and securely done up in bales, so they might be readily transported in the boats when the time of departure arrived.

Then the boats themselves were overhauled one day, any defects remedied, and all made ready for the return voyage.

The craft were secreted among the rushes down at the pond, and securely fastened, so that no sudden rise in the

water could tear them from their moorings and send them whirling down stream, leaving the trio of hunters in a sad pickle.

Had they been given their choice Karl and Cuthbert would have been only too glad of an opportunity to cross the country on horseback instead of by boat.

What glorious prospect it would have been, with Buckskin and Nicodemus under them, fresh for a race—the boys fairly groaned as they mentally drew the picture.

It seemed ages since they had last scoured the boundless prairie on the backs of these faithful and intelligent animals.

Even Old Sile began to hope that they were destined to finish the trapping season without further trouble and adventures, at least so far as meddling human beings were concerned.

There is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip, and the veteran found himself liable to make mistakes as well as the rest of mankind.

Cuthbert and Karl had taken their last trip up the cañon or ravine that day.

They explored the old bears' den, and again in imagination experienced the stirring scene that had taken place there during the earlier part of their stay in the valley.

A few ducks had appeared upon the swollen creek, harbingers of spring, and Cuthbert had even tried the fishing, though with indifferent success, the water being too muddy.

They expected to make one more grand hunt, covering the choicest bit of territory, where the chances were best for game.

After that excursion, which was laid out for the ensuing day, they cared not how soon Old Sile gave the order to pack up and get ready to leave the camp.

Youth always looks forward to enjoyments that are

about to come, while old age dreams of those that have been spent.

All of them were full of spirits on this evening in question.

Even Karl was persuaded to sing a ditty or two known to all cow-punchers that told of the pleasures and dangers of the great trail from Texas, and had a good rollicking chorus, in which the others joined, until the very roof of the old cabin seemed to tremble with the vibration.

Evidently our friends were growing somewhat reckless, now that the end of their stay in this valley of the gods was in sight.

Earlier in the season they exercised more care and discretion lest unwelcome strangers be attracted to the camp.

Even Rags and Tatters seemed to share in the jollity of the hour, little suspecting, poor cubs, that their time had about come to be rudely severed from their native woods, and taken to civilization, where curious people would stare and children poke sticks at them, probably in some menagerie or zoo.

At any rate, their gambols were of an excruciatingly funny order, and kept the boys in a constant roar of laughter from the hour they appeared on the scene up to the time Cuthbert led them into their "boudoir," as he had long since dubbed their dugout.

As usual Old Sile made the rounds.

Habit was strong in him.

In years gone by, when a man really took his life in his hand, coming up here to trap during a season, the utmost caution was necessary in order to baffle those keen foes with a dusky skin who prowled around searching for just such bonanzas as a camp presented.

Though many years had fled since then, and Old Sile had gone through various vicissitudes of fortune, he

could not forget what had seemed second nature in those halcyon days of yore.

Every night, as regularly as clockwork, he would pick up his gun, step outside and make a little circuit around the camp to see that all was well.

Not once had he found anything amiss, yet it pleased the old fellow to think he was doing his duty.

Next he would see that the window shutter was properly arranged so that while it allowed plenty of air to enter, it also prevented any intruder from gaining the interior.

Last of all, he barred the door, fixed the fire so that it would burn for hours, smoked a last pipe as a night-cap, and turned in.

Usually the boys were sound asleep long before these duties had been carried out.

Old Sile would wake up several times during the night, from force of habit, and if the temperature was low he took it upon himself to get up and replenish the fire.

Between these wakeful spells, however, the old fellow slept very soundly.

On this night he was unusually fatigued, and had made up his mind to let the fire take care of itself until morning.

It was easy enough to kindle it afresh after dawn had come.

He knew that the coming day would in all probability be their last in camp, for it was his intention, while the boys took their farewell hunt, to bring up the canoes, load them with some of their least important duffle, and have them ready at the landing, so that on the following morning they might complete the job and cut loose.

So the veteran slept soundly, as he deserved after such faithful labors.

With Cuthbert the case seemed different.

He dreamed, as usual, of wolves, dreamed he was skating far up some frozen river, when a pack of the hungry beasts began to chase along the snow-covered shores, keeping opposite him. Just as plainly as day he could see the gray, gaunt figures galloping along, now and then lifting their heads in a melancholy howl.

Of course, his gun was at home! It always was in these delightful dreams; and the camp lay ever so many miles away!

His only hope lay in outstripping the eager quadrupeds, and to this task he appeared to set himself with a right good will that certainly deserved success.

The ice was as smooth as glass, and his sharp skates rang as they struck the frozen bosom of the winding river.

He was going like the wind, and yet it seemed utterly impossible for him to leave his shadowy pursuers in the lurch. They no longer kept to the shore, but had leaped upon the ice and were after him in full cry. Nearer and nearer they came, three in all, tearing along like furies. A backward glance showed him their gleaming teeth, lolling tongues and bloodshot eyes.

Faster still.

It was of no use, he could not outrun these fierce foes, and some other method must be brought into play if he hoped to defeat them. Then he dreamed of trying a dodge of which he had heard Old Sile speak. Just as the wolves were at his heels he made a sudden sweep to one side, which he was able to do on skates, and the animals went sliding along the ice, unable to change their course.

Thus he gained a lead and was speeding down stream again like the wind.

Again and again did he seem to resort to the same

trick, until he began to grow weary and frightened lest his powers were failing.

Then came the grand climax. Just beyond in the middle of the river was a large opening in the ice, which suggested a brilliant idea.

He headed directly for it, the animals in full pursuit, the nearest almost upon him, when he made his sudden side sweep upon the very edge of the hole.

Of course, the wolves went sliding along, their savage yelps turning to terror as they realized the beautiful trap that had been spread for their unwary feet, and soused into the icy water, where Cuthbert left them, as he awoke with a grand start.

He never felt happier in all his life to find himself safe in his cozy bunk.

The fire was almost dead, and the interior of the dugout very nearly dark, which would indicate the hour as considerably past midnight.

Somehow this vivid dream had made such a deep and lasting impression on the lad's mind that he found it difficult to go to sleep again.

When he shut his eyes he saw those miserable three gray-coated pirates swarming out of the air hole in the ice ready to take up the chase again with that grim pertinacity that is a part of the wolfish nature.

So Cuthbert chose the lesser evil, and lay there, watching the last flickering tongue of flame that occasionally licked up the side of the charred log upon the hearth, illuminating a portion of the interior after a fashion, and then dying out, leaving things darker than ever by contrast.

He could hear Old Sile's regular heavy breathing, showing how far gone the veteran was in the arms of sleep. As for Karl, you would never know of his presence, he made so little noise in his slumber.

Another sound came, apparently from the outside, and Cuthbert, with his mind already filled with visions of wolves, instantly jumped to the conclusion that one of the "pesky varmints," or else a roving bear, was scratching at the door.

He raised his head, his first impulse being to slip out and bowl over the marauder.

By this time the scratching ceased and all was quiet. Then something tapped the wooden shutter.

Really, this must be a very bold, as well as inquisitive four-legged thief to try to gain entrance in such a manner.

Cuthbert lay there speculating in a sleepy way as to what manner of beast it could be. Of course, its identity could be settled in the morning by means of the tracks.

His curiosity waned, and drowsiness was getting a pretty firm grip upon the lad, when again he was startled to hear a sound.

This time it came from above.

Cuthbert was fully awake now, and listening intently.

As before he had raised his head, sustaining himself on an elbow.

It chanced that the night was very still, the wind having died down to a plaintive murmur among the tree tops, and even the gurgling of the swollen creek over the roots and rocks came only as a sigh.

It was not long before Cuthbert felt positive some object was nosing around up there where the stump that served as their smoke outlet was situated.

Well, he had always been suspicious of that particular place, ever since it allowed an unintentional visit on the part of a hungry four-footed eavesdropper.

Were they to have another intruder of the same order?

He felt positive the passage could not be of sufficient size to admit so bulky a form as that of a bear.

Yes, he could hear a scratching sound as though the would-be thief had entered the hollow stump and was slowly descending.

Then it must be a wild cat. There was one such prowler around, he chanced to know, that had thus far escaped their best efforts. Trap and rifle seemed to have no terrors for him, and, as if to prove his supreme contempt for these enemies of his race, it seemed as if he was now about to turn up in camp.

Cuthbert was not alarmed.

He had passed through too many adventures by this time to feel frightened because some animal, curious or hungry, felt inclined to invade their ranch.

Should he call out ?

That would, of course, arouse and alarm both of the sleepers, while it was apt to cause a hasty retreat on the part of the animal, whatever it might be.

He could reach out and lay hold of his gun with perfect ease.

Surely, with this weapon in his hands, he should be master of the situation.

Just then something moved. It was upon the floor and between him and the fireplace.

Had an intruder already gained entrance, while a second filled the chimney.

He reached for his gun, sat up in bed, and started to cover the dark object on the floor, when, luckily, the fire gave one of its periodical flareups, and he was astonished to discover one of the grizzly cubs lying there, while its companion nosed around, as if on the trail of something good.

Plainly, then, the door of their cage must have been insecurely fastened, and, finding it open, the two rascals had entered the warm dugout, preferring it to their colder quarters.

Had the noise proceeded from them?

Cuthbert thought not.

The cubs were capable of making many queer sounds, but he could not see how they could reach the shutter or scratch over the roof.

And, to prove it, there came that clawing noise again from the chimney, while the dear, clumsy little cubs were quite motionless close in by the dying embers of the fire.

There was no longer the shadow of a doubt.

And Cuthbert fancied it might be as well for him to keep a close observation upon that portion of the dugout.

He remembered with what a grand splurge the unlucky wolf had descended into the midst of the fire on that previous occasion.

Well, at least this fellow might be saved some of that trouble, since but a few embers remained on the hearth.

The question arose in Cuthbert's mind, how was he to make sure of his aim when the time came to fire, since at least a certain amount of light would be necessary if he expected to make sure work of it?

Then the scratching grew louder, and small bits of charred wood rattled down upon the hearth.

Old Sile slept on. Apparently it would have taken a young earthquake to have aroused him from such sound slumber.

Cuthbert saw one of the cubs rise and paw at some object that must have caught its attention.

Whatever the object was, it suddenly dropped lightly, knocking against the smoldering log, and immediately crouching there.

Now was his chance.

Luck must enter more or less into the game, for he could not count upon seeing well enough to make a surety of his shot.

Cuthbert, as has been stated before, was sitting up-

right in his bunk, and could bring the rifle to his shoulder with a simple movement.

He meant that the report of his gun should be the first warning to his friends of what was on the carpet, and he could easily picture their astonishment upon discovering how their camp had been a second time invaded from above.

He would have given something for the privilege of knowing whether the intruder might be classed as wildcat, panther, or loup cervier, for this was a distinction with a difference to him, as would be proven in case his shot only wounded the beast.

Of course, he had no means of telling. The object of his solicitude was there, a dark mass faintly outlined against the meager illumination of the dying fire, and it was his business to supply this object with a sufficiency of lead in as brief a space of time as the law allowed.

And yet, ere he could press the trigger, something occurred to bring about a change in the programme.

One of the cubs gave utterance to a terrified yelp, as though resenting the treatment received. If this were Tatters, Cuthbert knew the temper of that irascible little villain well enough to be sure he would assail the intruder tooth and nail, regardless of consequences, for Tatters had all the spirit of his free-born ancestors in his shaggy skin, and was growing so fast that he often gave his master a good fight ere succumbing.

It was Tatters, apparently, for the yelp was immediately followed by the sounds of a sudden tussle, as of two bodies threshing about, one hanging on with grim determination, the other frantically striving to get free.

And now it was too late for Cuthbert to fire his intended shot. In the first place, he could not begin to get a bearing upon the arch enemy, and, again, there was no

telling whether his bullet would find Tatters or the object for which it was intended.

The boy started to leave his bunk, intending to strike a match and apply it to the candle, the very last they had of its kind, and jealously guarded these two weeks.

Just as his foot touched the floor he heard some object fall heavily over one of the eager cubs, and at the same time a yell broke forth which Cuthbert recognized with a feeling of alarm, for he had lived among the lodges of the wild Sioux, and knew only too well the cry of a brave in distress.

CHAPTER XIV.

BOUNDING HORSE COMES INTO CAMP.

Cuthbert would never forget that remarkable scene of confusion.

The Indian brave, not knowing by what manner of beast he had been assailed, continued to shout at the top of his voice, both cubs set up a tremendous snarling, and, even while desirous of retreating, managed to roll all over the recumbent figure that threshed about upon the floor.

Above this uproar arose the voice of the old ranger as clear as a bell.

As he projected himself into the indiscriminate struggling mass in front of the hearth, Old Sile kept his head about him.

"Strike a light, one o' you—a light!" was what he was shouting.

Cuthbert heard—Cuthbert, whose mind had already been set upon the candle.

The uproar continued.

Indeed, it seemed to even grow worse when the trapper had entered the game, for he roared as loud as cowboy ever did upon the round-up trail.

Karl was not heard from, but when the match flared up in Cuthbert's trembling fingers, the first object his startled eyes fell upon was his chum, standing there, gun in hand, his face white, but determined.

The candle being lighted, both of them turned their attention to the disturbance.

Old Sile was industriously engaged in kicking the cubs aside, and at the same time hanging on to the recumbent figure of the midnight intruder.

This latter was an Indian, as they could see from his garb and black hair.

He had ceased his extravagant shouts as soon as the candle-light revealed the nature of his miserable little assailants. No doubt shame took possession of his heart, for a warrior would be mocked in his village if it were known that he succumbed before the attack of two grizzly cubs six months old.

Cuthbert, too, had his gun in hand. The chimney was still open, and if one fellow could enter, why not others?

He was glad in his heart there was an Old Sile present to take matters in hand; not that he and Karl would have failed to meet the difficulty, but the presence of a veteran inspired confidence.

"Watch the chimbly! If another sneakin' critter comes slidin' down, shoot straight. This ain't the time to be squeamish."

Old Sile was right. Perhaps their lives hung in the balance, and any measures they might take, however harsh, would be fully jusified under the circumstances.

Perhaps it would have been very unhealthy for a comrade of the humiliated brave to have made an appearance on the scene just then, for the boys were screwed up to that point of desperation that they must have done him damage on the spot.

Old Sile stood up, towering over the recumbent figure.

The frightened cubs cowered in a corner, whimpering and licking their trivial hurts.

"Get up!" roared the trapper, applying the toe of his moccasin to that portion of the Indian's anatomy best fitted by nature for the receipt of a hearty kick.

It was not yet manifest whether the fellow understood English or not, for when he roared aloud in his scrimmage with the bear cubs he used only his tribal language.

Apparently he was familiar with the indignity of a kick,

for he bounded to his feet like an india-rubber ball, his painted face expressing, if such a thing were possible, surprise, indignation, and rage all in one.

When he came in contact with Old Sile he met his match, a man whose familiarity with such rogues made him capable of mastering them wherever found.

That steel-blue eye looked into the red man's orbs with a power that made him quail.

One hostile movement on his part would assuredly invite his fate, and the man who dared such an avalanche as this iron-limbed veteran must be reckless indeed.

When Sile saw that he had the fellow under his control, he reached out quietly and possessed himself of his hunting-knife, which he calmly tossed to the other side of the room.

The brave made no remonstrance, but, with some last show of dignity, folded his arms as if to await his fate.

"Well, now, who air ye?" demanded his captor, in stern tones.

"Name Bounding Horse," answered the Indian, with the usual pride of his race.

"Oh!" said Old Sile, sarcastically, "d'ye know I kinder thort ye might be a feller by the name of 'Young-Man-Afraid-o'-Bear-Cubs.'"

The shot cut home, for the warrior moved uneasily and tossed his head higher.

"You think me afraid. Bah! an Indian warrior laughs at death. You no make cry, White Thunder."

Old Sile uttered an excalamation, and bent to look more closely at his prisoner, who had thus uttered a name by which he had been known among the hostile Indians in the years long passed away.

"It seems ye know me—p'raps ye're older than ye look. But never mind. I reckon as how ye understand that

bein' caught in the act of a thief ye have given yer life over into our hands?"

The Indian said nothing, but the look on his face expressed defiance.

"What was the game—our lives or booty? Why did Bounding Horse come crawling into the white man's cabin in the night?"

"Say, how d'ye do," came the bold answer.

The old ranger laughed.

"Wall, I declar to Moses, ye said it bravely when them cubs laid holt on ye. Now see here, what's the use o' lyin'—when a Sioux brave wants to shake hands and share the supper o' his white brother he don't go to the trouble o' crawlin' down the chimbly like an ole Santy Claus, that is, not generally, but comes to the door like a gentleman, and holds out his hand. Bounding Hoss, I'm very much afraid ye are given to prevarication."

The Indian leered a little, as though he thought he was being highly complimented.

"Ugh! me big brave—you ask Yellow Hair.* He tell you so. Ugh!"

That was so characteristic of an Indian, even Karl was forced to laugh.

"Wall, I'm afraid yer reputation with the gineral would have suffered if he'd a been here to have heard ye howl just now. What under the sun did ye think had ye?" asked Sile, for a purpose of his own, endeavoring to get the fellow into a communicative humor.

"Think bad medicine man—you call um devil—that all," grimly.

"And ye wanted our pelts?"

The Indian looked as though he would again deny the

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*Yellow Hair was the name by which General Custer was known among Sitting Bull's people.

soft impeachment, but, desirous of proving his boldness, he changed his mind.

"Me think you have too many—sink boat, drown um in river. Better me have few, save lives. Ugh!" triumphantly.

Cuthbert was staggered by the nerve of this aborigine. Surely, under the proper instruction, this son of the wilderness would have made a splendid lawyer. The foundation, at least, was all there, well and good.

"That was generous o' ye, chief. We ought to be grateful, I reckon. Now, ye warn't alone?"

"Ugh!" grunted the great Bounding Horse, watching his questioner closely, as though debating in his mind whether it would pay best to declare himself the only Indian in Paradise Valley, and thus prove his valor; or announce that he had three score of comrades nearby, all fearless braves like himself, and so arouse the fears of his captors and cause them to treat him with signal consideration.

Old Sile repeated the question with a new phraseology, though he well understood why the fellow desired delay.

"Ugh! me have friends," came the answer.

"How many?"

The Indian shrugged his broad shoulders, that were covered with several thicknesses of buckskin. When one shirt wore out a new and gaudily-trimmed second was added to the winter collection, so that under such a layer he was almost impervious to cold.

He held up his hands, with fingers and thumbs extended, then closed them to again spread the digits out.

"Twenty, eh? Wall, excuse me, but I doubt yer word, Bounding Hoss. How was Caleb Cross when ye seen him last?"

The boys saw at once what his suspicious were—that the man they had chased out of Paradise Valley in the

fall had come back, with others of his kind, bent upon thievery and revenge.

They eagerly watched to see what effect the accusation would have on the Indian, but a blank look occupied his face.

"Me no understand," he said, stolidly.

The old ranger tried several other ways of endeavoring to make him confess, but he found he had hold of a tough customer, and received little satisfaction.

"What do with Bounding Horse—let go loose?" he asked, eagerly.

"Not on your life we don't. At fust I kinder thought we'd just up and burn ye at the stake, but, on reconsiderin', I've detarmined ye'd do purty well for a hostage."

"How?" grunted the Indian, looking both puzzled and somewhat scared.

"Make ye responsible for the good behavior o' your friends. If they give us too much trouble, why, we'll shoot you an' then take our chances."

Bounding Horse slowly digested this proposition, and then a faint light broke over his clear-cut features.

"Ugh! good!" he said.

"I'm glad it pleases you, chief. We won't have any misunderstanding on that score, then, an' ye'll go off quiet an' peaceable like. Now, yer a prisoner."

"Yes, me know."

"An' I'm a-goin' to tie yer hands so ye can't get away."

"Ugh! no care me," with a grunt.

"That's sensible of ye. Karl, thar's some strong cord on a peg yonder; hand it over to me, if ye please. We'll make the critter nice an' comfortable like. Hold on, thar!"

His last words were caused by a sudden movement on the part of the buckskin brave, who was foolish enough to believe he had a last chance to gain his freedom.

The door leading into the den belonging to the cubs still remained partly open and it had just come under the notice of the Sioux.

Naturally, he thought it led to the open air, and when his captor's attention was distracted for just a second or two, he took advantage of the golden opportunity.

The way he went through that small opening was startling, to say the least, and it had been done so like a flash that Cuthbert could not have fired, even had he been possessed of the desire.

Alas for Bounding Horse! His star appeared to be on the decline, for he jumped directly out of the frying-pan into the fire.

It so chanced that the wretched cubs, upon finding themselves of small importance in the main dugout, and smarting under the hurts they had received, had taken advantage of the opportunity extended and crept through the opening to their own delightful den, where they could feel at home and hope to nurse their woes in peace.

Cuthbert was perhaps the only one who had noticed their withdrawal from the scene, and when he saw the Indian dash pell-mell into the little retreat he rather anticipated that the wretched Bounding Horse was in for another peck of trouble.

And he found it, too.

"Holy smoke!" shouted Old Sile, hardly knowing whether to laugh or get angry when he heard the racket break out afresh, and with more vigor than before, since the cubs, being at home, were ready to scratch and snarl with redoubled violence, "that fool Injun ain't had enough yet I reckon. Bring the light, lad, afore they everlastingly spile his beauty for him."

Sure enough, the dusky son of the wilderness was once more rolling over and over, pounding at the baby grizzlies

and putting up a fair specimen of fight, now that he knew the nature of his foes.

Had he possessed his knife it would have gone hard with the clumsy pets.

Old Sile once more threw them aside, and, at Karl's rebuke, they subsided into so many hairy little masses of growls and whines.

The Indian held out both hands.

"Tie um up—me have trouble enough."

And Cuthbert concluded the fellow was wise beyond his looks.

"Put 'em behind your back—so. Now, it's been some time since I trussed up a feller this way, but I reckon I ain't clean forgot how. To larn them things once lasts a lifetime. Thar, ye are safe enough now, my gallant buck. Stay thar until mornin'."

The captured Indian was made to sit down in a corner; his bronzed and paint-bedaubed face expressed no emotion, though he furtively watched Old Sile, as though a little suspicious of the benevolent intentions of the ranger.

Looking at the matter from an Indian's standpoint, he deserved the most severe punishment when caught in the act of thievery. The law of the border visited this crime with death, and it was hard for this untutored brave to understand what the white man meant to do with him.

Old Sile drew the boys aside.

They had come through the excitement in good order, and were now deeply concerned as to their further plans.

Danger lurked without; this fellow had companions of some sort nearby, whether Sioux braves like himself or the two ex-cowboys, it mattered little, since they were one and all hostile to our friends and envious of their possessions.

Old Sile had thus far successfully guided their craft

amid the storms, and now, with breakers ahead, it remained to be seen how the pilot would avoid a wreck.

"Wall, this is a pooty kettle o' fish," was the first remark he made, after studying the faces of the boys to see whether they were alarmed by the conditions confronting them.

He found them both eager-eyed and wideawake, apparently ready to back him up in any scheme he might propose, and developing no traces of serious "staggers."

"It winds up our hunt to-morrow, for one thing, you bet," said Karl, positively.

"Yas, that'd be folly. We've got only one thing to think of now," remarked Sile.

"How to levant."

"Exactly, Cuthbert—to vamose the ranch without fallin' into the hands o' the Philistines."

"We've got him as security," nodding in the direction of the prisoner.

"True enough, but knowin' that feller Caleb Cross, if so be he's here, ye can feel sure he'd never let the life o' a heathen stand in the way o' gettin' booty. We must be on the safe side."

"You've got a plan, then?"

The old man smiled at the quick manner in which they read him.

"I'm hatchin' one, even now. You boys have seen braves afore. Ye know what that beastly paint on his face means, and the feathers fastened in his hair?"

"He's on the warpath. They never do that when just hunting," spoke up Cuthbert, whose long stay against his will in a Sioux village had given him knowledge concerning many of the customs peculiar to these people.

"Right you are. That pint's settled, then. Bounding Hoss never came up here to hunt, but to raid our camp. That proves he knew we was in the valley, an' that Cross

an' the Greaser Pepito, with perhaps other bucks, are along. It's best to look the wust in the face, an' then ye ain't ever flabbergasted, so to speak."

The boys agreed with him, catching his sentiment all right.

"Now, my plan is this: To-morrow we stick close to camp, cuttin' wood and doin' of the chores as usual while outside. Meanwhile in here we'll git everything ready to make a sudden start."

"Yes," said Cuthbert, nodding eagerly.

"Then when it gits dark two o' us kin steal out an' bring up the boats, which we'll load in three shakes o' a sheep's tail, an' be off down the creek."

In imagination they could see it all, and should the plan prove as successful as they had a right to expect their enemies must speedily be left in the lurch.

"Any suggestions?" asked the veteran, as he applied a match to his pipe.

"Only one," said Karl, "and that is you let me go with you to get the boats."

"Wall, I reckon that would be the best thing all around. Consider it settled, as ye are more accustomed to a paddle than Cuthbert. In course, somethin' may happen to throw us back, but until it does, why we'll count the thing arranged."

"And shall we take the prisoner along?"

"Bless you, no. We'll fix him so he can't give the alarm, and leave him here."

"How about Rags and Tatters?" anxiously from Cuthbert, who had learned to have something of an affection for the little rascals.

Old Sile shook his head.

"It can't be did, youngster. I'd like mighty well to oblige ye, but when our lives may be at stake it would

be foolish to run more chances for the sake o' them b'ars."

Cuthbert was sensible enough to look at it in the proper light, much as he regretted the necessity for losing his pets.

"How shall we get rid of them?" he asked.

"Easy enough. Turn 'em loose arter nightfall. The natur' o' the animal will teach 'em what to do. I declar to Moses, it wouldn't surprise me a bit if both o' them bars went straight back to the ole cave in the coulie."

So they talked on.

Cuthbert managed to keep one eye on the rear of the dugout, where already a wolf and a real live Indian had found entrance.

Old Sile had kindled the fire afresh, so that it was now roaring cheerfully, and throwing up such intense heat that there was really no chance of any other Indian, however rash, attempting to imitate the strange example of Bounding Horse.

That individual sat with his back propped up against the wall, his small, keen black eyes watching those who held the council of war, as though he believed his own miserable fate was the subject that engrossed their attention.

"What time is it?" asked the pilot.

Cuthbert looked at his watch.

"Nearly a half after one."

"Later than I thought. Now you boys jest pile back into bed and git some sleep."

"But—the danger! The fire must be kept up and that chap looked after."

"An' I'm the one to do all that, don't ye forgit it. Not another word, now; when I git sleepy an' want ye to turn out I'll rouse ye up. Tumble in thar."

There was no gainsaying the old man when he had set his stubborn mind upon a thing, and, having had experience in this line before, the boys knew their only duty was to obey.

Old Sile filled his pipe again, and, with his gun close to his hand, sat down to take it easy—this being on guard brought back old times to his mind, and he really enjoyed the situation keenly.

Always those beady eyes of the Indian were fastened upon him, as though Bounding Horse sought to make out what was next on the programme, and how he fared in the plans arranged between the three trappers.

So the long night droned away.

Several times Cuthbert awoke and raised his head to take an observation, on every occasion discovering the old guide still enjoying his pipe and watching the flames playing merrily among the fire logs, while the prisoner had, to all appearances at least, fallen fast asleep, for his head lay low, his chin in conjunction with his breast.

Long did Cuthbert stare at that picture. He wished to carry it with him for the future, since this was to be their last night under the hospitable shelter of the old dugout roof.

In times to come, when scenes that were vastly different surrounded him, perhaps the pomp and vanity of society, or it might be the historical associations of the Old World, his heart would annihilate space, and memory again carry him back to the glorious winter spent with trap and rifle in the great wilderness of the Far Northwest, to this same humble but much beloved camp, where his spirit had so long communed with Nature in her most savage garb.

When Cuthbert for the third time opened his eyes he saw daylight streaming in through the slits in the shutter. A delightful aroma of coffee permeated the at-

mosphere within the dugout, and announced breakfast as on the road toward completion.

Old Sile allowed the Indian a chance to dispose of his frugal meal and then trussed him up again like a turkey ready for the spit.

"Don't worry a mite," said the ranger, as they sat there eating, "thar's nothin' to be afraid of. We'll jest be keerful not to wander away, an' allers keep a hand on a gun. Depend on it, them piratical craft have hauled off an' mean to wait for night to swoop down on us. P'raps," with his old chuckle, "they'll find us missin'."

CHAPTER XV.

THE FLIGHT FROM THE HAPPY LAND.

Then began a day that Cuthbert would long remember as without doubt the most intensely disagreeable of his life.

Suspense was with them every minute.

There could be no telling when a storm might break over their heads.

These unprincipled scamps had little respect for human life, and might at any moment decide to employ extreme measures.

When Cuthbert was outside cutting wood or doing some of the chores he felt as though many hostile eyes were fastened eagerly upon his every act from behind the myriad pine trees, and that possibly some rifle covered him with a yearning, itching finger on the trigger that only wanted permission to open the ball.

No wonder the boy was nervous.

Why, it was worse than any experience he had ever passed through.

Even his close call with the blizzard had not affected him this way.

Then again, when it was his turn to be in the dugout he felt dreadfully worried about those outside.

What if Karl should be made a victim to the passions of that miserable arch plotter, Caleb Cross?

He actually groaned at the thought.

Still, noon came and went, without any sign from the enemy.

Everything seemed as usual around the camp, though

it was only by an effort that the boys refrained from betraying their state of mind.

The pile of wood increased, until it seemed as though there was enough for at least a full week.

This was Old Sile's diplomacy.

He knew such action as this was well calculated to throw the enemy off the track, since it seemed to settle the fact that the three trappers meant to remain in Paradise Camp that long, at least.

As a usual thing, men do not deliberately go to the trouble of cutting a week's supply of firewood unless they expect to enjoy its use—that is, save on rare occasions, when they have a deep object in view.

When Old Sile was in the open he had shown some natural curiosity in looking for tracks.

He found them, too, and with that wonderful faculty possessed in such a marked degree by men of the old school of borderers, from the time of Cooper's Leather Stockings down, he read the signs as a scholar might a printed page.

While they ate their lunch he told the result of his scrutiny to the boys.

He made out that both Caleb Cross and the Mexican were nearby. The one wore heavy boots, the other high-heeled Mexican affairs. Besides, there were a number of others, three or four Indians, at the least, who left the tracks of moccasins.

This was pleasant, indeed!

And doubtless these worthies were even then in consultation, deep in the coulee or some other retreat, devising means as to how best they might make an overwhelming assault upon the fur gatherers, without assuming too much risk, for such men usually care a precious lot for their worthless bodies.

Cuthbert plucked up hope.

Since the morning had passed without an alarm, there was good reason to believe that the balance of the day might be as free from trouble.

The prisoner had kept a dead silence.

He ate when they gave him the opportunity, and doubtless would have much enjoyed a chance to make a dash for freedom, but the door was closed, and one of the trio held a gun in his hands all the time he remained with his arms unbound.

The packing was finished.

What they intended taking along with them had been made up in compact shape, so that the various bundles could be transferred to the dugouts in the briefest possible time .

The Indian watched all this.

His beady eyes snapped with intelligence, even though his face expressed no emotion.

To him the hustling sound of the ringing axe without was but a hollow mockery, for he was upon the inside.

He knew full well that this industry was undertaken with the evident intention of deceiving those who undoubtedly kept a watch upon all operations.

What would he not have done for the privilege of sharing his knowledge with the others? But those miserable bonds effectually prevented this. So he had to take it out in looks.

When Cuthbert was inside he amused himself with the bear cubs.

Never had the clumsy little brutes seemed so full of mischief, and it actually gave the boy a pang to realize that they must part company before many hours.

Perhaps it was just as well, since ere long they would have grown too large for pets, and must have ended their lives in some circus or zoo.

Much of the culinary department was to be abandoned.

It had served its purpose and they could not be bothered with so many kettles and tin dishes that were apt to rattle together and betray their movements to the enemy.

Old Sile made a cache in the rear of the dugout, where he secreted them, hoping to utilize them should fortune ever tempt him to spend another trapping season in Paradise Valley.

The space originally occupied by stores, long since eaten up, was now available for the compact bundles of furs.

Old Sile had abandoned all that were in a poor condition, or about which he had doubts, not caring to give them room in the boats.

He carefully divided the impediments, so that by long odds the larger share should go in the boat with him.

Everything being reduced to scientific order, no hitch was anticipated.

Of course, the greatest danger lay in their embarking.

Would the enemy remain at a distance until the night was well advanced, so as to lessen the chances of discovery?

This was what our friends desired, what they one and all ardently prayed for.

Cuthbert would not be happy until they were well on their way down the stream, when they could laugh at danger.

How slowly the afternoon waned.

Cuthbert even imagined that some modern Joshua must have commanded the sun to stand still over Gideon's hills, for each time he took an observation that glowing orb seemed in almost the same place.

His sorrow about leaving the camp was for the time being overwhelmed by his eager desire to escape the threatening danger.

Later on it would be time enough for regrets.

For the last time he looked around upon those familiar scenes, when evening was drawing nigh.

Never more would he behold them, yet long would the picture rise before his mind of that comfortable camp in the valley of the gods.

An early supper was scheduled, so that they could begin operations as soon as it was really dark.

Old Sile carried in the regular supply of wood to last through the night.

He was more than usually noisy about it, hoping to attract attention, so that his act might lull any suspicions to sleep.

Karl served as *chef*.

Of course, they must carry coffee-pot, frying-pan and a few necessary things along with them. These could be wrapped up with the pelts in such a way that they were not apt to give forth any jingling sound.

The meal was eaten almost in dead silence.

Some heavy weight seemed to rest upon their spirits; no one could exactly define the feeling, but conversation lagged.

When they were through it remained only to feed the great Bounding Horse, and while this operation went on Old Sile guarded him with a gun in his hand.

Everything was working well up to this point, and he did not mean to have the fellow make a break for liberty and injure their plans if by due vigilance it could be avoided.

Then he set to work tying the brave hand and foot, and even gagging him, so that it would be impossible for him to shout.

Later on, when his friends made an entry, he could attract their sympathetic attention by groans; but ere that time came the three fugitives hoped to be far away.

It was now growing dark.

Luckily enough, there would be no moon to betray their secret flight.

Quite a breeze had blown during the day, and it was fondly hoped that this would continue into the night.

The stronger it blew the better, since with such a rustling among the branches of the trees any little noise they might chance to make would be less likely to be overheard.

Cuthbert had quietly opened the outer door of the bear's "boudoir," and pushed his pets into the open air.

He never expected to see them again.

Some day, doubtless, grown into fierce monsters, they would meet the usual fate of their species at the muzzle of a hunter's deadly rifle.

It was now about time to make the first move looking toward evacuation.

Old Sile stood up and tightened his belt.

Karl knew what this meant, and picked up his gun in silence.

The old ranger looked a little stern, but, seeing the anxious expression on the face of Cuthbert, he allowed his own angular phiz to relax in a smile.

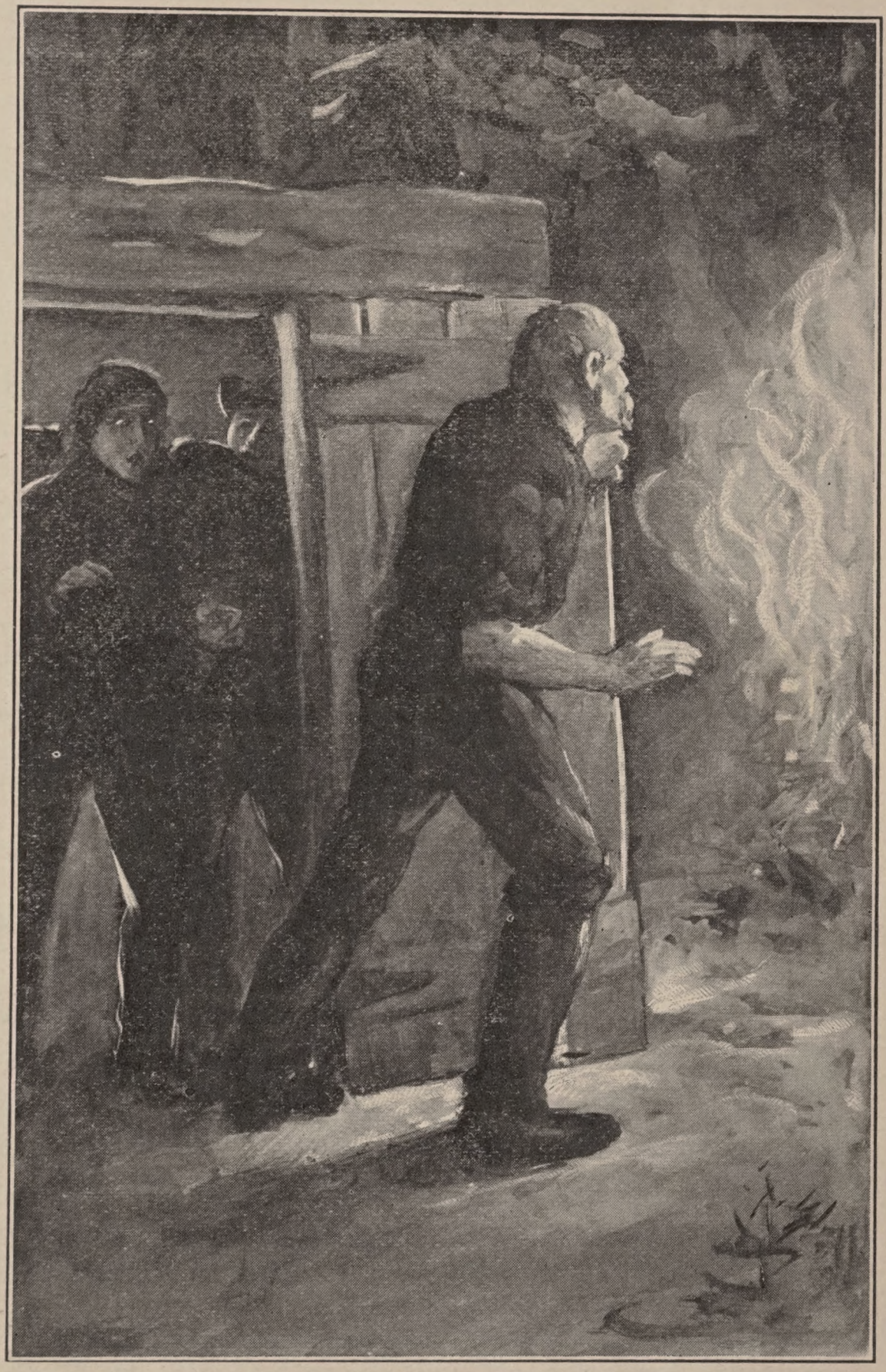
"It's all right, younker. Don't worry a mite. While we're gone, fasten the door o' the den arter us, and then carry the rest o' the goods in thar. The fire would betray us if we left this door open. Now, look sharp, and listen for our signal on the bear door."

When the connecting door was closed it was as dark as Egypt in the little dugout recently used as headquarters for the cubs.

Cuthbert let his comrades out and then once more secured the door.

He was alone!

There seemed something awful in the very thought,



"'This way, quick boys! All creation's bein' warmed up. Them onery skunks have been here an' fired the heap o' brush alongside the cabin.'" See page 96.

when taken in conjunction with the presence of danger outside.

He could not bear to think of it.

To occupy his mind he set to work as Old Sile had suggested, transferring the goods to the small cave, where they were placed as before, in two separate piles.

This task occupied some little time.

He was conscious that a pair of snappy black eyes watched his every move, and while the helpless Sioux brave could not express himself in words, doubtless he thought a great deal.

There he lay like a bundle of pelts, able to breathe and that was about all.

Cuthbert hoped his friends would set him free in due time—not too soon, so as to endanger the safety of the fugitives, but say at midnight or second cock crow, for he should not like to think of the poor wretch as utterly abandoned there, his bones to be discovered by some roving hunter years hence.

Was it time for the others to return?

Cuthbert began to grow anxious.

Looking at his watch, he found they had been absent just half an hour.

Then he remembered that it usually took him about that time to walk to and from the pond.

On this occasion they had to paddle the two empty boats up against a strong current, and do it in a manner so as not to attract attention. Perhaps it would be well to allow them, say, another twenty minutes.

When this, too, had slipped away he became conscious of a dread that words could not begin to express.

What had happened?

A dozen things came before his disturbed mind like ghostly visitors.

Perhaps the boats were missing, having been discovered and stolen by the enemy.

Could the allies have laid a trap so cunningly arranged that even an old campaigner like Sile had fallen into it?

Unable to sit still longer, Cuthbert walked up and down the dugout, finding in exercise some relief to his strained nerves.

He held fast to his gun, determined that if necessity compelled him to fight he would give such an account of himself as would not bring dishonor upon his illustrious name.

The thought of taking human life was terrible to the lad; but there are times in the lives of those to whom adventure falls when such weaknesses are crowded to the wall, and the sterner nature, inherited from forefathers who had to face dangers almost daily, comes uppermost.

Was that the signal knock?

Cuthbert stood still to listen. Then he went to the door of the sub-cave to bend his ear attentively, while his very heart seemed to stand still with anxiety.

It was not repeated, so he was forced to conclude that the sound he had heard must have been the sighing of the wind through the pines, or the gurgle of the swollen creek.

As the minutes crept on apace, poor Cuthbert's anxiety grew in proportion, since he felt almost positive something must have happened.

Meanwhile, let us see what progress was being made by those who had gone for the boats.

Old Sile led the way.

There was, of course, some danger of discovery, but he did not believe it would come to pass. At about this hour he fancied the allies would be gathered around some fire in a portion of the coulee where the light might not

serve to betray them, and eating supper while they arranged their plans for a surprise party later in the night.

He only wished most fervently that the boats were even now at the landing and being loaded. Once free from the immediate neighborhood of the dugout their pace increased.

Old Sile was more anxious than he would have cared to confess when they drew near the reeds where he had secreted the boats.

There was a small chance that the craft might have been discovered, and should this prove to be the case it must turn out a very serious calamity for them.

Of course, Old Sile was the man to meet and overcome any emergency, but he had reached an age of discretion, when peace was far preferable to turmoil, and he sincerely hoped the boats would be where he left them.

It was even so.

Karl never looked with greater pleasure upon the dugouts than now.

Near by the paddles had been artfully hidden in a hollow tree.

These being secured, each of them selected a boat, and, entering, began to push through the dead reeds and grass, which, parting before the prow of the boat, closed again back of the stern.

The creek was gained.

Here they met the current and had to settle down to business.

The water was high and the tide fierce indeed, so that a little experience in bucking against its power gave them to understand that a sturdy setting pole was of greater value here than a broad blade.

Accordingly, the paddles were laid aside, and they began poling their way upstream.

It was laborious work at best.

No wonder Cuthbert grew heartsick waiting for their coming, and paced the cabin, listening anxiously for some sound to indicate that his comrades had succeeded in their undertaking.

Foot by foot they had to work their way along, while the waters boiled around.

It was like ascending the rapids; indeed, there were places where the labor was quite as heavy.

Good muscle can accomplish wonders when properly applied, and in due time the two clumsy dugouts drew near the spot where our friends had first made a landing in Paradise Valley.

Now it behooved them to use additional caution in all their movements.

All of them had agreed that should they be attacked at any time they were to put up the very best article of fight they could.

Straining their eyes through the darkness, they began to see familiar landmarks.

Here was a pine that leaned over the creek at an angle of forty-five degrees, from which Old Sile had once knocked a wild cat that had dark designs upon their larder—beyond a queer formation, very like a gigantic crow's nest, being the top of a freak tree, was outlined against the starry heavens, and finally they made out the three sister pines, that marked the old landing near camp.

The journey upstream had been carried to a completion, and thus far all seemed well.

It was cause for congratulation indeed.

Carefully the boats were secured.

Shortly after two dark figures crept up to the hillside, and a scratching noise was made upon a door partly screened by a mass of hanging vines.

Cuthbert's heart beat high with rekindled hope when this sound reached his ear, and eagerly did he fly to open.

The first sound that greeted him was a whisper of caution from the veteran that hinted of peril being nigh; but, happy in welcoming them back, the Virginian had cared little for the danger, so long as they could meet it together.

He dreaded being alone at such a time, a prey to torturing thought.

"Git to work, all hands, an' kerry the things down to the boats. I'll be thar to pack 'em whar they belong."

This was the dictum of the pilot.

Both boys started eagerly to obey.

"Don't forgit yer guns—allers hang on to 'em through thick an' thin—best friends a feller kin have in such diffikilties," said Sile, in the lowest kind of a tone, that might have been mistaken for the wind five feet away.

It would require quite a few trips to and fro, but all this had been reduced to such a system, and the packages arranged accordingly, that all that was necessary was for them to pick up a load and start forth.

This was the excruciating part.

Would hostile eyes discover them?

If so, how long must the spy be in seeking the camp of his fellows and acquainting them with the fact that their quarry was slipping out of the net?

The first trip was made successfully, and, so far as they could tell, there was no cause for alarm.

At least, Old Sile announced that "everything was lovely and the goose hung high," and the boys were ready to look upon their old and tried guide in the light of a prophet.

They went back, leaving him to stow away the duffle where it belonged.

How dreadfully lonesome the great woods seemed on this night.

Doubtless it was because their imaginations had been

so tremendously aroused that even trifles were impressed upon their minds with startling force. The wind, whispering as it sighed across the valley, the distant howl of a hungry wolf, the nearby hoot of their old friend in the dead wood, him of the startling yellow eyes—all these things they had heard many times before, yet never had they possessed the same peculiar significance as now.

It is far from a pleasant sensation, this feeling that enemies hover behind bushy coverts and bulwark of trees.

Karl minded it less than his friend, for he had grown up with this sort of thing, and had better control over his nerves.

Not that Cuthbert was scared. Had the occasion come about he would have proven his valor most convincingly; but this long-continued strain, and the crisis that had now descended upon them, when there seemed so much at stake, began to have its effect upon his system. He felt cold all over, trembled as with the ague, and, had he not resolutely gritted his teeth together, they must have rattled like the aspen leaf.

This did not prevent him in the least from doing his full duty, and, while Karl naturally took the lead, Cuthbert made a good second.

Again they loaded themselves.

One more trip, it was calculated, would clean up the ranch, and leave them foot free.

How Cuthbert wished this was the last lot—he did not know when he had felt half so eager to have a little time speed by.

They reached the boats, where Old Sile crouched, rifle in hand, eager and grim.

"Seen anything—heard any suspicious noise?" he whispered, hoarsely.

"Nothing," said Karl, readily enough, but Cuthbert dared not trust himself to reply, since he had peopled the

woods with a thousand argus-eyed foes that spied upon their every move.

Once more, and for the last time.

Old Sile guessed the nervous condition of the Eastern lad, and insisted that he remain by the boats while he accompanied Karl back for the last load; and this programme was carried out, though Cuthbert, feeling as though he were being tenderly cared for, feebly remonstrated.

They were absent a few minutes, but to the anxious lad, crouching there by the water, it was an eternity.

He fumed because the swollen stream made such a din in his ears as to endanger the chances of his hearing aught else; and almost strained his eyeballs to the verge of bursting in the endeavor to see something.

And his worst fears seemed about to be realized, for, without the least warning, there came a sudden detonating shot, followed by a shout, that made the echoes ring along the valley.

CHAPTER XVI.

ADRIFT ON THE CURRENT.

Strange to say, although Cuthbert had been exceedingly nervous all through the evening in expectation of something dreadful that was about to happen, no sooner did the catastrophe come to the front than a wonderful change appeared to envelope the lad.

After that one quiver of startled surprise, he seemed to recover in a marvelous degree.

He had been crouching in one of the boats, and his first act was to spring to the shore.

Then he remembered that Old Sile had given him most positive orders before leaving, to the effect that, no matter what occurred, he should not desert the boats.

It was evident that the veteran had even anticipated such an emergency as this.

Old Sile usually covered all possible points, and it was this faculty for embracing details that had always brought him to the front as the leading spirit and director of the grand round-up at Sunset Ranch.

Cuthbert had never been a soldier, but he came from a family justly celebrated for its military history.

He had long since learned what it was to obey orders to the letter.

Accordingly, the Virginian dropped down there upon the bank, awaiting developments.

There chanced to be a log at the place. Many a time he had sat upon it when the fall winds stirred the pines, and watched the waters of the creek go hurrying by on their zig-zag journey to the Big Horn.

It served him in this emergency, for back of its shelter-

ing dimensions he could crouch and watch for what was to come.

There he remained, quivering with a certain amount of eager anxiety, yet showing as bold a front as any one so situated could have done.

After that single shot and the quickly-succeeding shout a silence had come upon the scene. Even the owl ceased to raise his mournful voice, as though alarmed by the disturbance, and the prowling wolf far up the valley had also reached the termination of his serenade.

How dreadfully still it was!

Only the fretful murmur of the stream broke the dead silence. Even the pines had ceased to rustle with the night wind.

Cuthbert would have given much could he have understood just what that shot signified.

Who shouted?

He did not believe it was Karl—it had seemed more like the voice of an Indian, a whoop such as he had heard so many times among the tepees of the wild Sioux when a prisoner in the village far above the Bad Lands, that lay to the north of the cattle ranges.

Had Ole Sile shot the spy?

Cuthbert did not believe so.

His reasons were well taken, and did the lad great credit. In the first place, he believed he knew the peculiar detonation of the veteran's rifle.

It was one he clung to from old and sacred association, and, when discharged, gave forth a singularly ringing report.

Then, again, so far as Cuthbert could determine, the shout or whoop that had immediately followed did not indicate pain.

On the contrary, what he knew of Indian nature gave him to understand that it was meant as a signal of alarm,

as though the sentry or vidette had suddenly discovered what the trappers were in the act of doing, and had discharged his gun as well as yelled, in the hope and expectation of bringing his comrades down upon the spot before it was everlastingly too late.

A few seconds crawled along on leaden wings, seconds that to the anxious boy seemed almost centuries.

Then he heard a movement close by.

Something was stirring through the brush that lay between the landing and the dugout, and which had been left very much as nature meant it in order to more effectually ward off suspicion.

Cuthbert drew back the hammer of his gun.

He gritted his teeth together, and his eyes blazed with the fires of battle, for, much as he regretted the necessity, he was ready to do his duty should the occasion demand.

Nearer came the sounds.

His strained vision began to catch glimpses of a moving figure, advancing directly toward the spot where he lay waiting.

Cuthbert brought his gun around in that quarter so as to be ready for the worst.

At the same time he did not expect to use it, for just back of the moving figure he saw a second.

They looked more like bears walking on their hind feet than human beings, and it was this circumstance that brought the waiting lad renewed hope, for he remembered that his comrades when they came would be loaded down with the last of the packages.

"Sile, is it you?" he asked, quickly, and the answer came, as refreshing to his ears as the dew of heaven is to the parched grass.

"You bet, younker."

A great load was lifted off the mind of the young Virginian. He sprang to the boats in order to receive them,

knowing full well that time was of tremendous value just now.

Everything had been arranged for a quick start. Paddles were in place, so they could be instantly snatched up, and the bows of both boats already pointed down stream.

Neither of the laden voyagers offered any explanation of the alarm given, nor was such really needed under the circumstances.

Old Sile tumbled his bundles into the bow of the first boat.

Karl deposited his burden more in the center of the second craft, for there would be two passengers in this instance, one forward and the other aft, so the cargo must of necessity be stowed amidships in order to trim the boat.

"We're off!" grunted Old Sile.

Karl gave his boat a push that dislodged her keel from its resting-place ashore, and then sprang nimbly in, as it was seized upon by the strong current.

Immediately he took up the paddle.

Cuthbert heaved a sigh of genuine relief.

Thus they were borne away from Paradise Camp in the dead of night.

Many times Cuthbert had pictured their departure, and always felt that it would be with a feeling of pain and reluctance that he would bid farewell to the scene of their winter's campaign, which from association had become very dear to him.

Under such circumstances as these, however, he could part from the place without any longings or burning regrets, since danger lurked under the pines.

Indeed, he did not once turn his head to look back. Perhaps he knew how useless this would prove, and how much more important it was that he should keep his eyes to the front in order to discover any peril lurking there.

Shouts began to be heard.

They came from the direction of the coulee, and it was evident that the signals of the vidette had been both heard and understood by the balance of the crowd, and that they were now racing pell mell for the camp.

Old Sile listened eagerly.

Perhaps their enemies had anticipated some such move as this. Perhaps they had even arranged a plan whereby they could, by crossing a strip of country, reach the creek at a certain point before the fugitives had descended that far.

This was possible enough, for the creek made an eccentric and tortuous channel, so that in coming home from the pond below Cuthbert had learned how to save almost half a mile by leaving the creek and cutting across lots.

The only question was, had the allies been shrewd enough to discover this point?

Old Sile hoped not.

It would bring the two hostile parties into close contest, and a desperate fight must ensue, which, for the sake of the boys, he would rather be excused from participating in.

That was why he strained his ears to listen so long as the shouts sounded, hoping ere they ceased to have gotten a pointer as to the plans of their eager enemies.

And when the whoops and shouts had given way to utter silence again, he had reason to believe all was well. To the best of his figuring, the allies had headed direct for the dugout.

The way was clear.

They could leave Paradise Valley without an encounter with the desperate spirits who sought to overwhelm them for the sake of gain.

Onward swept the little flotilla.

Old Sile went in advance.

All the boys had to do was to keep astern and not lose sight of the leading boat.

In order to assist them in the darkness that was especially dense under arcades of pines, the pilot had fastened a white cloth to the stern of his craft.

Cuthbert could distinguish this even when no part of the boat might be seen.

He also grasped a second paddle, ready to dip into the water should the occasion arise.

On the way up he had been able to make himself of considerable use in this manner, but the conditions were changed now, and the friendly current served them in lieu of muscular exertion.

A single swing of the paddle, a turn of the wrist on the part of Karl in the stern would change their course miraculously, stay their progress and almost hold the boat suspended in mid stream, such was the magic of the ashen broad blade in experienced hands.

To the right and to the left, following the winding of the stream, they floated.

How friendly the darkness!

At times the trees formed an arch overhead, shutting out the inquisitive stars, and on such occasions the gloom was so intense that had one been standing on the bank not more than five yards distant, it would have been utterly out of the question to have seen the boats floating by.

Now and then the stream narrowed, and at such times the pace increased, as the water rushed through its narrow channel almost with the fierceness of rapids.

Then again they would emerge upon a broader expanse of water, such as constituted the pond where Cuthbert had his adventure with the fishing bear, or that little lake formed by the dam of the beaver upstream.

In these places the current lacked power to keep pace

with their impatient spirits, so that the paddles were brought into play with a consequent acceleration of speed.

After all, it seemed a dramatic and fitting close to their season in the valley.

So many adventures had fallen to their lot while in the wilderness, that the ordinary breaking up of camp must have seemed rather a tame and prosaic ending to the campaign.

This kind of flight was something to thrill the nerves, and while Cuthbert might not wholly enjoy it just now, the time would come when it would appeal to his sense of the eternal fitness of things.

And his heart sang with deep joy on another account also.

He had not wholly realized what a hold the free-swinging life of a cowboy would have upon him, or how much he would miss being in the saddle.

Why, the mere anticipation of seeing his horse again, of stroking his velvety muzzle, of vaulting into the saddle and dashing at mad speed over the prairie, dotted with myriads of sweet wild flowers, of swinging his hat high in air, expanding his lungs and giving vent to those shouts that had formerly sent the alarmed cattle forward —it was just heaven to think of it.

If he felt that way, what of Karl, the child of the prairie, who had never, until now, been really out of sight of his native heath?

He must have suffered much during these long winter months, and rejoiced exceedingly now at the glorious prospect ahead.

Karl was a lad of few words, and seldom revealed his thoughts, so that even his chum did not know how much he yearned for the life to which he was accustomed.

When they had passed the pond long to be associated in Cuthbert's mind with trout and bear, and entered the

stream beyond, Old Sile felt sure they were not to be ambushed by the allies.

Doubtless these innocent worthies had rushed to the dugout and found there only the prisoner.

This fellow would, of course, soon put them into possession of the facts concerning the case. But what good would that do? They could hardly hope to overhaul the fugitives by chasing along the banks, for below the pond the sides of the hills began to grow exceedingly rough, even precipitous in places, and progress in the daytime was not very rapid, while on such a dark night it was next to impossible.

Although Old Sile spoke not a word concerning the matter, there was one unsolved problem that gave him more or less concern.

How had Caleb Cross and his fellows come to the Happy Valley region.

If over the hill by some trail known only to his Indian allies, it was all right.

On the other hand, could they have ascended the creek in bull boats (Indian craft made of buffalo hides, and as serviceable as a dugout, while weighing but a third as much, though less commodious)?

If this were true, he knew full well the end of their adventure had not yet been reached.

These fellows had much of the pertinacity that distinguishes the wolf. They would start in hot pursuit, and exhaust every possible endeavor in the hope of overtaking the birds that had so neatly slipped out of the cage.

So Old Sile made it a point to keep his gun where he could place his hand upon it in a big hurry, should the occasion arise.

He also directed Karl to shove his canoe alongside—the creek was plenty wide enough for the two boats abreast, and should it narrow again they were apt to be

warned in time by the rushing and swishing sound of water forced through the narrow neck of the bottle.

"How're ye feeling, younkers?" he asked, in his kindly way.

"Happy as a lord," announced Cuthbert.

Karl said "ditto," not caring to tell just how the hot blood swarmed through his veins at the delightful prospect of soon throwing a leg over Buckskin, and rushing over the level as in days of yore, his vigorous quirt snapping in the air, his cheery "so long" sent out to every cow puncher met upon the trail.

"I kinder reckon as how we got the jump on 'em that time, an' they'll have to hustle some to ketch us up," remarked Old Sile.

Cuthbert was quick to see a vein of meaning underneath these words.

"Then you expect them to follow us?"

"Wall, I shouldn't be surprised a bit," was the laconic answer.

The boy's heart fell. The prospect did not appear so bright as before, since Old Sile admitted that they were not yet out of the woods; but the pilot was a bit "old fogy" in his ways, and believed in an extra allowance of caution. There might be a chance in ten of this thing happening, but why borrow trouble?

He wanted to know more. It was always his way to desire to investigate.

"How will they follow?" he asked.

"Perhaps by water. It depends on how the critters come into the valley."

What he meant to imply was plain enough—Caleb Cross and his red pirates might have canoes secreted somewhere along the creek, and even then be spinning down stream in hot chase.

"What a pity," he said, dejectedly.

"Eh, what's that, lad?" asked Sile, knowing he had something on his mind.

"That we couldn't have discovered their boats as we came along, and either carried them off in tow or else destroyed them."

"Well said, younker. Good for you. It'd have given me a good deal o' pleasure to have run across the canoes, for if they're buffler hide a sharp knife would a done the business for 'em in short order; but that wasn't to be our luck, an' I reckon as we shouldn't complain. We've kim out o' the 'fair with credit so far. What if they had discovered our boats, hey?"

Thus Cuthbert was brought up with a round turn, for what the old philosopher had remarked was to the point. If everything had not come their way, at least they had abundant reason to feel grateful.

"You're right, Sile. But it would have been a fine bit of strategy if we could have spiked their guns in that way—it would have cut off all pursuit," he said, loath to give up the idea wholly.

"Well, p'raps the opportunity may turn up yet, who knows. Meanwhile we'll make all the time we kin by usin' the paddle whenever we find a chance."

Cuthbert said no more.

Indeed, it was necessary that he pay considerable attention to what lay beyond, for they knew not what had taken place so far down the stream in the months that had passed since they worked up from the Big Horn river, and to run slap up against a rock, or a log that had become caught fast, was a possibility that suggested an upset.

A wet jacket was something not to be desired by any of them, and hence it behooved the cruisers to keep a sharp lookout for snags.

The strain upon both eyes and muscles was intense.

Cuthbert wondered how long they would keep it up. He tried to remember just the length of time it took them to ascend the creek after leaving the picturesque Big Horn, and then figured that at this pace, borne along on the swollen current, they should reach the junction of the streams after midnight, at least long before the first peep of dawn lighted the eastern sky.

By the time this had been attained they would in all probability be ready to cry out "enough" and seek some recuperation in sleep.

Perhaps Old Sile might bring to bear upon the novel situation some of his old-time Indian strategy, and arrange a plan whereby the flight could be maintained even while they rested, though the difficulty of navigating the eccentric river would preclude their attempting to float down its swift bosom while asleep.

There was time enough to grapple with these problems when they presented themselves for solution.

Meanwhile it required all their powers of energy and observation to keep clear from the dangers that menaced them along the lower creek.

There were huge bowlders which none of them could remember having seen before, but nevertheless they threatened to end the cruise then and there unless vigorous measures were taken to avoid a meeting.

Cuthbert had keen eyes, and his was the voice usually first raised in warning when some such peril confronted them.

Anon it was a tree that had given way and formed a bridge across the creek, under which the boats were able to pass only after some little time and trouble had been taken to clear away the debris which the current had banked up against this barrier.

It was exhaustive work, especially since the boys had had no sleep after a day and night of unusual anxiety.

For one, Cuthbert felt he would be ready to cry hurrah when the last bend had been turned, and the twin dug-outs floated upon the broader waters of the Big Horn.

Ere they reached the fort, so far away, other dangers might encompass them, for the Indians were growing exceedingly bold under old Sitting Bull, and needed to be taught a severe lesson.

Later on in this same year there was destined to be fought that famous battle of the Little Big Horn, when valiant Custer, known along the border as Yellow Hair, and his three hundred equally brave troopers were to be surrounded by a horde of the hostiles, and cut down to a man; so it can be understood that it was a season when peril was unusually rampant, and the danger of a pilgrim hunter, miner, or cowboy off the trail losing his "thatch" doubly threatening.

They must have put miles behind them.

The stars still shone, and as the banks drew further apart, owing to the widening of the creek bed after other brooks had drained into it, they had better chances to view the blue arch above, and to note the spangled dome that shut them in like a canopy.

More than once Cuthbert fervently wished they had no fears of pursuit.

He would have enjoyed very much going ashore in many an inviting spot, making a camp fire and rolling up in a blanket, and believed he could sleep until sunrise without a break.

It reminded him of the time he had tried moose calling with a Penobscot Indian guide upon one of the myriad mystic ponds of Maine, and though they paddled, and "called" through the birch horn until midnight, they only had the satisfaction of a distant answer, which materialized into nothing tangible.

As on that occasion, his limbs grew stiff with the cold,

and the cramped manner in which he was compelled to squat in the boat; only then he had the delightful assurance of a warm camp and a supper at the end of his cruise, while now such things were only tantalizing memories.

Still, a good blanket is not to be despised when one finds an opportunity to roll up in its generous folds, and Cuthbert yearned to have that chance come his way.

Each of them had already wrapped a blanket about their shoulders, the better to resist the chill midnight air as they swept down the stream, homeward bound.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LONE VIDETTE.

The further they descended the creek the stronger the current grew, since its waters received constant reinforcement from smaller tributaries.

Cuthbert could not get his bearings.

To him it was all Greek, for he found himself utterly unable to recognize any portion of the surrounding country.

True, the light was nothing to boast of, but a familiar scene would have appealed irresistibly to his memory.

It mattered little, since he had the utmost confidence in the sturdy old pilot, and, besides, they must surely sooner or later reach the Big Horn if they continued to slide down the current of Paradise Creek.

Strange what a bitter chill comes with midnight's hour. Even in summer months it is often felt, and at this time of year penetrates the very marrow.

This was especially true when upon the water, and moving at the rate of six miles an hour, as they sometimes believed was the case, when the water foamed and gurgled around them very much as though the canoes were shooting rapids.

All things temporal must have an end, and their descent of the creek reached its close about an hour or so after midnight.

Even Cuthbert knew it was coming from the manner in which the creek widened, for he remembered that feature of its topography.

It was time, he thought, for he really could not have stood this thing much longer. His poor teeth rattled like

castanets in the adept hands of a Spanish dancing girl, and his whole body felt miserably stiff.

Five minutes on shore, with vigorous jumping and slapping of arms, would have restored the circulation and brought back a warm glow.

Old Sile gave a grunt. Even he had grown weary of the cold voyage and yearned for a snug little camp fire, where the chilled members might be toasted.

Doubtless the veteran disliked this method of sneaking away like fugitives from their winter camp; but his contact in earlier years with hostile Indians had made him a philosopher, so that he cared little as to the means employed so long as the desired end was attained.

They saw the river before them, the stars reflected from its swollen tide, the little wavelets gleaming in the light from above, as though each were tipped with splashes of silver.

How quickly the boats were turned to glide with the current.

It was a spring freshet.

There were all manner of things floating on the bosom of the historic old Big Horn—trees that had been uprooted and logs that had perhaps lain quietly along the banks for years.

As soon as Sile saw these things he knew to a dead certainty that there would be more or less peril in attempting to float down stream while sleeping in the boats.

Some audacious snag might at any moment ram one of the craft with such disastrous results that the occupants would find themselves, as well as the precious cargo, in the drink.

Time was of much value to the fugitives, and even the prudent pilot, in his desire to put as much space between his party and those who came after, might have decided

to take the chances of floating had it been a warm, summer night.

As it was they must almost perish with cold if this thing kept up much longer.

He was secretly greatly amused over the lack of complaint on the part of his comrades. They suffered even more than he did, but a grim determination locked their young lips.

"Wall, I declar to Moses, this here is cold enough to beat the band. I wonder if we couldn't have a bit o' fire ashore," he ejaculated, as he slapped his arms together, and then quickly fended away from a floating tree that appeared especially desirous of nearer acquaintance.

Cuthbert made an almost inarticulate assent—in fact, he could not speak, he was so chilled.

Seeing which Old Sile knew they must make a change in their programme, no matter what dangers it brought about.

"To the other shore," he said, tersely, for his experienced eye told him this was better suited to their requirements, having a heavy fringe of bushes, while in places the trees now overhung the swollen waters, offering a splendid hiding-place for boats, that might baffle ordinary search even in the light of day.

When Cuthbert attempted to get ashore he was surprised to discover that he felt as stiff and sore as might an old man of eighty.

How good it felt to dance up and down with swinging arms, and how the warm blood tingled in his finger tips.

As soon as they had stirred the engine into renewed life, and began to feel as though some energy had been aroused, the boats were fastened by their painters and securely hidden under the canopy of branches and bushes.

After which the three picked up blankets, guns and a few other things that might come in handy, and set off in

search of some nook where they might with impunity start a little bit of a blaze.

It was not so bad, now they were off the water, and that chill had been left behind. Still they needed sleep the worst kind, and were bent upon taking what chance offered.

Ere long they ran across the place.

If Old Sile had known of its presence, and was leading them directly to it, he could not have done better.

It filled their requirements, being a rock grotto, where the light of a small fire would be utterly invisible to any one on the river.

Here they might arrange their blankets and enjoy a richly-earned rest.

Eagerly they started to find wood, no easy task in the cold starlight; but all were accomplished graduates in the foraging class, and knew the most likely spots to secure plunder of this sort, so that presently a fair-sized heap of broken dead branches and what might at some time have been driftwood attested to their energy.

Then Cuthbert served as stoker, a blaze sprang up, communicated to the wood, and, behold, the fire was an accomplished fact.

How delightful it felt! What wonderful cheer there may be in a merry little blaze! Cuthbert always believed his remote ancestors must have been fire-worshipers of some sort, because he had so great an affection for the crackling flame that was man's good friend.

The frozen world assumed quite a different aspect when surveyed from beside a jolly fire, and presently both boys felt so drowsy nothing would do but to roll themselves in their blankets and obey the sleep god.

Old Sile, calmly smoking, with a blanket over his shoulders, Indian fashion, watched the small fire and occasionally glanced over at his charges.

All was still; not even an owl or a nighthawk disturbed the solemn silence.

The veteran doubtless recalled many nights, just such as this, when he lay hidden in some secluded section of the vast wilderness.

After a time, when he had smoked two pipes, he arose, and, selecting a soft spot, placed his blanket there.

Then, with one more glance at the sleeping boys, he proceeded to deliberately dislocate the fire, one ember going this way, another that, to be trampled on without remorse, so that in about sixty seconds not a trace of it remained.

Satisfied, Old Sile crawled under his warmed blanket, and was speedily lost to trouble.

Frequently the veteran awoke from a doze, to lift his head and listen attentively, but the night wore on and no sound that seemed suspicious to his trained ear came out of the forest.

So at last came the dawn.

The boys were awake with the first golden shaft which the rising sun sent through the trees.

Already Old Sile had a cheery blaze going, and the coffee-pot hung over it, suspended from a steel rod, which fitted upon two crotches some two feet above the ground.

Another day had begun, and once more they would have to work hard to outwit the keen-eyed Indian followers of the revengeful Caleb Cross.

While they ate a frugal breakfast they talked the situation over calmly.

Old Sile wanted suggestions upon which to build the foundation of his campaign, and these bright-witted boys were capable of helping him out.

It was finally decided first, that their enemies, having been baffled thus far, were in a desperate state of mind, and would, no doubt, just as soon ambush them as not;

second, that the danger of such a catastrophe must of necessity be greater in daylight than when darkness held sway over the surface of the Big Horn; and, third, that they were, after all, in no such rushing hurry to reach the post that they would be justified in taking these extra chances in the matter.

When these things were added up, the result was a resolution to hold the fort, to remain in their present snug retreat until once more night had succeeded day.

Cuthbert was secretly glad, more so than he trusted himself to state in words.

Truth to tell, while the boy was as brave as the average, and might even boldly face a foe, he had an instinctive dread of unseen dangers, and the very thought of those Indians hiding here and there in the bushes, ready to greet their coming with a shower of bullets at such close range that they could hardly miss, was enough to make his flesh creep.

Of course, there would be no roving around the country.

Old Sile would not hear of this; the danger was too great, and they were already compelled to accept enough risk.

One thing, however, he insisted should be done, and this was to guard the boats.

He had an especial interest in the safety of the craft, seeing that they contained a goodly store of prize pelts that were his property; but, aside from that, the boats were almost essential to their escape from this hostile region. At any rate, without them it meant a long and arduous journey on foot over many leagues of wilderness, where peril might lurk.

He himself took the first spell, the boys agreeing to relieve him at noon.

So off he went, rifle in hand, and the lads were left alone among the rocks.

The day, luckily, was fair, else they would have suffered keenly, being without shelter.

It warmed up after the sun began to get in his work, and the fire was kept at low ebb, fed with very dry heart of pine, after Sile's directions, so as to produce but little smoke.

The morning passed tediously enough.

Karl and Cuthbert talked over their plans and kept a bright lookout for danger.

Not once would the Virginia lad allow his gun to leave his side. He believed that this warfare with unscrupulous border desperadoes, both red and white, was a serious business; and if disaster came at all, it was most likely to strike home when one was unprepared.

The youngster had a long head upon his shoulders surely.

Toward the middle of the day the fire was revived, and a meal cooked. After this Cuthbert made for the river, intending to relieve Old Sile, who was on guard over the boats.

A whistle brought the veteran out of his cover.

"How's everything, Cuthbert?" he asked, gravely, as though he had not seen the boy for a week.

Cuthbert declared that, so far as he knew, all appeared to be lovely.

"Have you seen anything of the enemy?" he asked eagerly, in his turn.

Old Sile nodded, and said:

"Three went past in a boat. I believe they landed down below, 'cause they was workin' in toward this shore as they went around the bend yonder."

Cuthbert glanced nervously around, but his face had no stamp of fear upon it.

"They may be searching the shores?" he suggested.

"Just my idea to a dot, younker."

"If they come here?"

"Lie low."

"What if they start to make off with our boats. Shall I open on them?"

Old Sile grinned.

"I'm afraid that would be pesky darin', lad. But I reckon they aint a goin' to come. Use your judgment, anyhow."

The fact that he left Cuthbert there was good evidence that he had faith in the hotspur lad.

At least Cuthbert took it as a compliment when he came to examine the facts.

Left utterly alone upon the river bank, he first of all entered the little copse which had served Old Sile for shelter.

Here he found a convenient log which he could straddle, and be fairly comfortable, at the same time keep his eyes fixed upon the boats.

These latter could be just faintly seen through the interlocked branches that hung so low over the water's edge.

It was rather a singular duty, yet Cathbert realized how important the safety of the boats was to the successful ending of their cruise.

An hour crept by—two of them.

He could see how far the sun was moving down the western sky, and could calculate about the length of time that must elapse ere they once more resumed progress.

Cuthbert would be well pleased when this campaign reached its conclusion, and his eyes were once more gladdened with a sight of the well-beloved Sunset Ranch, with its wide range, its lowing herds, careering cowboys, and the familiar faces at the stoop. His heart quite

yearned to once more see the precious one who had so long been lost—Little Sunshine, the pet of the ranch.

The charm that had come with the novelty of this lonely life in the wilderness had long since been broken, and he did not believe he would care to pass another winter trapping.

Besides, this unpleasant wind-up had done much toward causing him to regret that he had come, for Cuthbert's spirit revolted against being hunted like some pariah dog or a wolf that had stolen a sheep.

Time dragged along.

He might have cut the afternoon in twain, and gone back to camp, allowing Karl to take his place on vidette duty, but what was the use of changing? He felt comfortable enough as it was, and could hold out until dark. Besides, Karl worked hard in the boat and needed sleep more than he did.

So he stuck to his post.

In all this time he had not, up to now, seen anything that savored of danger.

Sounds reached his ears, but they were of the wilderness only. A squirrel barked, an early blue jay scolded, and a prowling fox gave a note of sudden alarm as its startled eyes fell upon the figure riding the log.

Where were the Indians?

Did they search the shores, expecting that the fugitives must have landed for a rest?

If so, how came it none had been here? Old Sile had not seen any save those in the boat.

Would they come?

Cuthbert clutched his gun tighter whenever this thought occurred to him, and bent a close scrutiny upon the tangle up and down stream, as though fully expecting to see some skulking form creep into view, with bead-like eyes keenly on the watch.

What was that?

Surely something stirred over yonder, for, see, that branch still trembled. Was it an Indian creeping toward him, and was his presence already known?

Cuthbert drew back the hammer of his gun, and half raised the weapon to his shoulder, only to again lower it with a grunt of disgust, mingled with relief, as a lean wolf trotted into view, scenting the air as if getting track of dinner somewhere to windward.

When Cuthbert made a move the animal gave a yelp of fear and bounded away into the thickest growth.

The music of running water was constantly in the ears of the watcher, for the river had reached a point of its natural bed, and found many exposed roots along the bank, among which to churn and gurgle.

It began to grow monotonous.

Cuthbert wished he had brought his blanket along, not that he was cold, but it might have served him as a soft cushion, since a vigil of six hours is not conducive to comfort, especially when one perches upon a rough log.

He was so constituted, however, that lacking anything did not disturb his peace of mind to any serious extent. He did the next best thing and found a loose pelt in one of the boats that answered his purpose admirably.

Lower went the sun.

Why, this was easy after all, a regular snap, Cuthbert mentally assured himself, and he could keep it up indefinitely, if need be, so long as dear old Karl profited thereby.

How much he had grown to care for Karl, and what rosy visions of a future, spent in the society of this sturdy comrade, he conjured up while sitting there astride that log.

One thing was certain—they should never be parted, save by death, of that Cuthbert felt absolutely certain.

Doubtless, Damon often said the same to himself with regard to Pythias.

There was that old nuisance of a lean wolf prowling around again.

Perhaps he had discovered the fact that after all there was something worth eating in one of the boats, and thus he hung around, worried because of Cuthbert's guardianship, yet pressed by the pangs of hunger to make another attempt to secure the coveted spoils.

Of course it would be the height of folly to shoot the miserable beast. The shot might serve to bring their enemies to the scene of action, and it would surely alarm his friends in camp, causing them to come galloping down in hot haste, under the belief that he was in serious trouble of some sort.

So Cuthbert, who hated the breed like poison, heaved a sigh at the necessity of foregoing such a pleasure, and resolutely held his fire.

Then he concluded that the same conditions did not hold good with regard to heaving a bit of rock at the object of his detestation.

Accordingly, he bent down and secured a fair-sized stone that would, if violently thrown, create considerable disturbance among the dead leaves and bushes, doubtless sending the skulker away again in mad haste.

He knew just about where to throw. All the rustling had come from one spot, and a good cast would send the missile directly into the clump.

His arm was drawn back, the muscles set for a generous effort, and he was in the very act of consummating the deal, when, as if by magic, he seemed to lose all desire in the line of arousing consternation in that wolfish heart.

Indeed, some species of black magic seemed to have been exercised over the boy, for his extended arm re-

mained in its strained position and he sat there like a statue.

The reason was very simple.

When the bushes parted they gave passage, not to the lean, hairy body of a lupine skulker, but to the bent form of a Sioux Indian brave with his copper-colored face gashed by streaks of war paint.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW CUTHBERT DID IT.

At sight of that painted warrior creeping out of the bushes so like a panther nearing his expected quarry, Cuthbert actually felt as though his blood had temporarily congealed into ice, for a cold shiver ran over him.

He saw that the fellow was apparently as yet quite unaware of his presence, and intuitively realized that if he let his arm drop under the weight of the stone the movement would in all pro' ability attract the quick eye of the man who crawled.

Hence, he made a martyr of himself and continued to balance that five-pound rock.

It would not be for long, he saw.

The Indian had discovered the boats under the low branches. Cuthbert knew this by the way he started, and eagerly craned his neck, so that he might see without exposing himself.

Was he alone?

It really looked that way, since by no word or sign did he seek to convey a knowledge of his lucky find to another.

His dusky face glowed with satifaction, and doubtless his black eyes fairly scintillated in the overwhelming joy of his savage soul.

Found at last!

Here were the two boats they sought, laden with treasure, and abandoned by their crews, who had doubtless fled across country to the fort, fearing lest the whole of Sitting Bull's tribe was in arms, camped on their trail.

Perhaps the most glorious visions of loot rushed into

the mind of that lone scout as he crouched there, craning his neck and surveying the outlines of the boats so snugly esconced under the canopy of branches. Why should it be necessary at all for him to announce his rich discovery to the balance of his confederates? Let them find a bonanza for themselves; one man's luck should be as good as another's any day.

Perhaps he reasoned in this strain, for Indian nature ordinarily is selfish, and the temptation in this case well-nigh irresistible.

Let them find their own lode; he was entitled to his treasure by right of first discovery.

Of course, the covetous fellow was not long content to worship his idol at a distance.

Seeing no sign of an enemy near the boats, he began an eager advance, and was speedily alongside the nearer craft.

Of course, when his back chanced to be turned toward Cuthbert, the boy got rid of the stone he had held out at arm's length with such heroism; but he was mighty careful how he dropped it to earth.

This allowed him the opportunity he craved to clutch his Winchester eagerly and throw back the hammer.

After which he heaved a sigh of genuine satisfaction, born of power.

There seemed to be only the one warrior, for when Cuthbert glanced to the right and left, he saw no trace of others.

True, he was a strapping big fellow, and capable of doing herculean work if given the opportunity, but Cuthbert knew that so long as he could cover him with a gun that never failed, and keep him at a little distance, he had the game in his hands.

The painted warrior uttered growls of satisfaction as he began to overhaul the contents of the boat.

Somehow this vandal act stirred up Cuthbert's pugnacious nature, and he could not longer keep the peace.

"Here you, stop that!" he burst out.

The Indian's head came up like a flash, and he stared straight at Cuthbert.

Doubtless what he saw rather took him by surprise, for the rifle of the sturdy youngster was covering him, and there was a convincing, determined air about the lad that declared he meant business.

The red man looked at Cuthbert, and that individual looked at him, but on the face of it the boy had the best of the bargain.

"Ugh!" grunted the trapped one, but whether that signified disgust at his plight or contempt for his young adversary it would have been hard to have told.

The fellow seemed to understand what power there was back of the boy's elbow, for thus far he had made not the first effort to escape, but stood, or rather crouched, in the boat, as though hewn out of bronze.

"Caught like an old fox in the trap," said Cuthbert, in the best Sioux he could command, for his captivity among the lodges of these valiant people and intercourse with that friendly old medicine man, had given him opportunities to pick up even more than a simple smattering of their tongue.

To say the warrior was surprised at being thus addressed would hardly cover the case, yet such is the complete mastery over the emotions possessed by his kind that all he did was to grunt once more the expressive "Ugh!"

It could be seen, however, that he was scrutinizing the young fur-taker with more care than before.

The idea may have struck him that he had seen the lad ere now. There were many adventurous young bucks who had stolen away from their peaceful villages to

throw in their fortunes with the warlike old chief, Sitting Bull, and this fellow might be one of them.

Cuthbert was in something of a quandary.

He felt like the man who, in the heat of an auction, had bid upon an elephant, and, to his dismay, found the animal knocked down to him.

Now that he had the gentle brave, what was he to do with him?

The fellow was undoubtedly as full of tricks and turns as an egg is of meat.

So long as he kept him covered all seemed lovely enough, but he could hardly expect this picturesque state of affairs to last the balance of the afternoon.

Nor could he attempt to bind the fellow's arms, for to accomplish this he must come into personal contact with him, and this was what he did not wish to do, for just as soon as he put down the rifle it gave the stalwart Indian the chance his crafty nature coveted, either to cut and run, or else to hurl himself upon the lad.

Cuthbert felt he was in for it.

If he had been anxious to see the sun decline in the west before, he was doubly so now, and with good reason.

Karl and Old Sile might not come until dusk, and that was two hours off—an eternity, it seemed to him.

Why, his arms would be numb before one-quarter of that time elapsed.

Plainly, then, something must be done to bring matters to a climax.

Now, if there was only some way his ingenuity could devise whereby the prisoner could be made to tie himself up securely—but Cuthbert laid no claim to the art of necromancy, leaving all that black dealing to the witch doctors and medicine men.

At the same time, his thinking of such a desired end

may have been the means of suggesting a bright little thought, that looked to him like an oasis in the great alkali desert.

"Come ashore!" he ordered.

It was spoken in the Sioux tongue, and the warrior could not help understanding, so he had no excuse for refusing.

Still watching the boy covertly out of the corner of his eyes, he clambered over the stern of the boat and jumped ashore.

When he stood up he seemed to Cuthbert to be a veritable giant in size, and, as he thus secured his first good look at the fellow, he recognized him as a young brave known in the tribe as the Otter, and who had been in more scrapes than any two of his companions.

Cuthbert had always disliked and avoided the fellow during the entire length of his captivity.

He saw how the other watched him while coming ashore, and knew this look boded him no good if once he yielded up the advantage held by reason of his gun.

"You are the Otter—you remember the paleface boy adopted into your tribe? I am Little Beaver."

Then the Indian smiled, as though the chance for which he was looking had suddenly cropped up.

"Little Beaver—ugh, yes; me Big Otter. You gone long time. How?"

He started to advance, with his hand extended and an eager look on his painted face.

Cuthbert was not deceived.

True, he was only a boy, but, knocking about the world as he had, rubbing elbows with all manner of men, had given him more than an ordinary insight into human nature.

He knew this fellow as a treacherous, cruel character, and he had not the slightest intention of allowing him to

come within arm's length lest the other's superior prowess deprive him of what advantage he now held.

"Stop!"

The swinging up of the rifle, with a finger on the trigger, was a gentle persuader itself, and more significant in the mind of the warrior than a score of commands.

He cut short his advance.

The smile, that seemed to set so illy upon his hang-dog countenance, quickly faded away and gave place to his usual crafty expression.

"Little Beaver forget him friends," he said, in fair English.

"That isn't true, but you were never one of my friends. You hated and annoyed me all you could. I believe you would have killed me if you dared. Now the shoe is on the other foot. I can drop you where you stand. You needn't look around, for if you run I shoot, d'ye understand."

"Ugh!"

That time the disgust was manifest all over his face as he grunted his answer.

He seemed to measure the distance that now lay between them.

Perhaps they were separated by twelve feet. What of that? Was he not an athlete, the best runner and jumper in his tribe, and had he not covered a greater distance than this when competing in the lists?

"Don't you try it, that's all. I've shot a wild cat on the jump, and I'm quite sure I can put daylight through such a big duffer as you, Otter."

The Indian concluded it would not pay to make the attempt. He liked to have at least a fair chance when he risked his life, and in this case everything was favorable to the young fur-gatherer with the gun.

Still his hand was not yet exhausted; there were other tricks to be tried.

"Little Beaver think um bad Indian. Me no want trouble, not much."

This time he walked backward, waving his hand as though in dignified farewell.

Cuthbert had no idea of letting him go—it would only serve to bring the rest down upon the spot in double-quick order.

"You stand still there till I tell you what to do. You're a prisoner, Otter, and you can't go away. I'm going to tie you up just as soon as I can think of a way."

"Little Beaver first catch Otter."

Even as he spoke he was gone.

Cuthbert was taken by surprise. He had prepared himself to fire should the Indian start to running away, and there were so many obstacles in the way of rapid progress that he believed he could take at least three snap shots at the fugitive ere he had a chance to get out of range, while one should be all that was necessary.

Instead the warrior, true to his name, had taken to the water when in difficulty.

He threw himself backward with a graceful movement, as of a curving trout leaping out of the water, and a splash announced his arrival in the drink.

Cuthbert ran hastily forward.

He knew what it probably meant for the fellow to give him the slip.

A comparatively few jumps landed him on the very spot where the tall Indian stood when last seen.

Surely not five seconds had elapsed since he struck the water. Indeed, the waves caused by the sudden immersion of such a large foreign body were still lapping the side of the nearest boat when Cuthbert reached the

edge of the drink, but not the slightest trace of the Indian was to be seen.

Well had he been named, for no one was ever more at home in the water than this human otter.

Cuthbert had known him to do wonderful things in the days that were gone, and the memory of them flashed over him now.

From where he stood, gun in hand, he could see further than a man could progress under water; the swimmer would have to rise to the surface for air, and then would come his chance to shoot.

Somehow the situation reminded him forcibly of various duck hunts in the past, where he stood up in the boat looking for a cripple to come to the surface, when a quick eye was needed to locate him and fire before the crafty bird sank again.

A minute crawled by—two of them.

And Cuthbert, who had watched so keenly out upon the river, had discovered no sign of the escaping Indian brave.

Well, that settled one thing. The fellow had not struck boldly out for the middle of the stream, but hugged the shore. Perhaps, taking a lesson from duck nature, he expected to follow a well-known trick of these cripples and hide his head in the tufts of dead grass alongside, while his body still remained under water.

Cuthbert turned his attention to a point closer at home, and proceeded to examine every bunch of grass or clump of bushes that dipped into the water within a distance of ten yards in either direction.

He was indeed staggered.

The adroit Otter had vanished as completely as though the ground had opened and swallowed him, leaving not a trace behind by which he could be tracked.

It was most mysterious.

Perhaps Old Sile, drawing upon his ample experience, might have solved the puzzle in much less time than it took Cuthbert to see through the wily red man's game.

Never had the boy been more puzzled, more chagrined, in all his life than when it began to look as though his anticipated quarry had slipped through his fingers.

The fellow must be somewhere, but had he not thoroughly examined the ground and looked into every possible hiding-place?

Ah! the boats!

Perhaps behind them the cunning brave had come to the surface, changing his position when Cuthbert walked the shore by simply passing underneath and coming up on the opposite side.

Cuthbert seized upon the idea as though it were inspired.

He again walked the shore.

As he passed the boats he looked sharply, and fancied he saw something vanish below the surface.

To make sure, he stepped back again to the lower side and covered the spot with his ready rifle.

Then shortly there came into view the bedraggled long black hair, adorned with turkey feathers, and the paint-bedaubed phiz of the Otter.

As soon as the Indian opened his eyes he discovered the rifle pointing at him, telling him the game was up.

It had been a very clever little deal, and perhaps deserved a better fate, but Cuthbert had learned something of Indian character while sojourning among them, and just now he reaped the benefit of his knowledge.

"You come out quick, Otter," he said.

The warrior would gladly have availed himself of a chance to do something more suited to his taste; but, then, he did not like the looks of that gun. He knew how much quicker a bullet can move through space than a

human being, even though he be an athlete, and the boy on the bank looked as though he were now fully aroused, and would take no more nonsense.

So Otter, making a virtue of necessity, came out of the flood.

A sorry sight he presented, dripping wet, with patches of mud clinging fondly to him, and some floating dead weed in his stringy, coarse hair.

He looked sheepish, too.

All this trouble counted for nothing, and his captor was a boy he had affected to despise.

It was sad.

The air was still rather keen, and as soon as it struck the soaked warrior he began to wish he had thought twice before plunging so recklessly into the flood, for presently his strong, white teeth would be rattling together, in spite of his vaunted valor and phlegmatic nature.

He stood before Cuthbert, who had backed away a dozen feet.

"You're a nice otter—why don't you swim when you're in the water? You've got a good deal to learn yet," said the boy, scornfully.

"Ugh! Little Beaver heap talk. He learn be big Indian. What want do now?"

There is nothing like a little adversity to take the buncombe out of a boastful man.

"Lie down," said Cuthbert.

The fellow grunted his surprise, but at once threw himself upon the ground.

"Roll over on your face—that's the way. Now put your arms behind you. I'm going to tie your hands. One move, Otter, and you are a dead Indian."

"No move, sure—be good—you see," quickly muttered the brave, raising his nose from the ground in order to speak.

"Well, remember, and if I have to kill you it'll be your own fault.

Cautiously Cuthbert approached.

He had stout cord in his pocket, having made it a point never to go without a supply, and, making a slipnoose, he set to work to catch the Indian's hands in this.

To a cowboy, accustomed to the lasso, this was not so very difficult a task.

The Otter might have resisted only for the fear that possessed him lest he pay with his life for such rashness.

Once those two bronzed, cruel hands were in the loop of the baby lariat Cuthbert knew he could throw more energy into the game, and with hot zeal he wound the whole balance of the cord around and around the wrists of his prisoner.

All was well.

He had won out and could look Old Sile squarely in the eye.

An extra piece of twine served to fasten the Indian's ankles together as he sat with his back to a tree.

He was a sorrowful looking brave, and had not heart of grace to even say "ugh" when Cuthbert asked a question.

So the lad went back to his log.

From there he could watch his prisoner and at the same time feel fairly comfortable.

The time drifted on.

No more prowling red men came upon the scene, for which Cuthbert was glad, as he might not meet with such success in handling the second crop, or else would be forced to use his rifle, which would go against his grain.

The day was wearing away, and surely his comrades must show up ere long now.

Perhaps they would be surprised to learn of his little adventure with the Otter.

There, was that Old Sile's signal?

He bent his ears to listen, and could see that the Indian had heard something too.

"Keep still, you," he admonished.

When the sound came again it was close by, and Cuthbert quickly answered it.

Then Old Sile came into view, bearing a few things on his back, which proved that the little camp was to be permanently abandoned. Behind him Karl trudged along, likewise encumbered with blankets and other impedi-ments, but at sight of his chum he found an opportunity to wave his hand in greeting.

Neither of them noticed the sitting brave, though they passed within a few yards of his position. Both were eagerly looking for the boats, glad to see that all appeared well.

Cuthbert's heart beat a lively tattoo. He felt the mo-ment of his triumph was at hand.

"Everything lovely?" asked Old Sile, pausing beside the post of the vidette.

"Couldn't be finer," replied the boy, in an assumed careless tone.

"Seen anything o' that boat an' the three critters as was in it?"

"No boat passed here," came the truthful reply.

Old Sile looked at him sharply, as though there was something very queer about the boy which he could not understand.

"Well, that's a lucky thing all around. We kin eat our bite right here by the boats, an' git off as soon as dark settles, because the sooner—— Holy smoke!"

Down went the blanket, coffee-pot and frying-pan, and up went the old ranger's gun like a flash, until it covered

the half-concealed form of the Sioux brave. Karl, believing they were about to be attacked, and unable to drop his burden, managed to fall upon one knee and shove his rifle forward, ready to render an account of himself.

Cuthbert could hardly keep from bursting into a loud laugh.

He was really afraid lest the old warrior might let fly, and do some damage that he would later on deeply regret.

"Hold on, Uncle Sile," he cried, hastily, "don't you fire—that's my Indian!"

The veteran, still holding the stock of his gun against his shoulder, slowly turned his head and looked at the boy. There was a quizzical gleam in his eyes that betrayed how keenly he enjoyed the novel situation.

"Your Injun—whar under the sun did you git him, I'd like to know?"

"Well, you see, he was in the water, and I was afraid the poor wretch might freeze, so I had him come ashore and be looked after."

Old Sile bent over the chapfallen brave.

"I reckon as how you made it warm enough for the critter. He don't 'pear to be thankful, so far's I kin see. But these onery thieves aint got much sense o' gratitude about 'em at the best. Now tell us the hull business."

So Cuthbert waded in.

Karl grinned sympathetically as the yarn was gradually unfolded, and nodded his head in appreciation of his comrade's valor, while even the ancient ranger allowed something akin to a smile to flit athwart his rugged and seamed countenance when he heard how neatly the Virginia lad had caught the cunning warrior at his ducking dodge.

"Ye deserve credit for the job, younker; an' I'm a-goin' ter tell that story more'n a few times around the camp fire in nights to come on the range or in the wilderness.

So ye know this forlorn-lookin' chap, an' he goes by the name o' Otter. Let me git a few words with him, an' see if I kin find out what the plans of his fellers are."

It was useless, just as he might have expected, knowing Indian character so well. The Otter pretended at first not to understand the nature of the proposition advanced, and then when Old Sile spoke it clearly in the Sioux tongue he drew himself up as well as his bonds would permit, gave one gutteral "ugh" and looked defiantly into the face of his questioner.

Death itself had no terror for this untutored child of the forest and the prairie when his honor was at stake. He utterly refused to betray his friends, even though by so doing he sealed his own fate; and Cuthbert, who could appreciate such heroism, was determined he should not suffer through his defiance, if it could be managed in a manner compatable with their safety.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FIRE GANTLET.

At any rate their time must be short, since the gloaming was now at hand.

Cuthbert rejoiced to think their delay would soon be a thing of the past. Upon the broad and friendly bosom of the Big Horn they might continue their voyage, and, if all went well, Old Sile promised that they would be at the frontier fort within six days.

He wondered what was to become of the captive Sioux brave.

Old Sile would not take his life, that was sure, and the only alternative seemed to be that he should be left as they had the valiant chimney sweep, Bounding Horse, in bonds.

Even here Cuthbert found doubts to give him worry. There was a chance that the wretched brave might never be found if they left him tied to a tree and so deprived of the power of speech that he could not attract his companions to the spot.

Hence, he was curious to know just what measures the old pilot would take to assure their safety, and at the same time allow the buck to live.

He was not long left in doubt.

The veteran drew his canoe alongside the little bank, and stepping in proceeded to rearrange the bundles.

Then it became manifest that he meant to carry the Indian along, at least during a portion of their voyage.

In one way the big fellow might prove somewhat of an incumbrance, but they had no current to contend against, and should the situation become desperate at any time

perhaps it might be to their advantage to have a hostage in camp.

Old Sile nodded to Karl as he stepped toward the tree where the prisoner sat.

The fellow had managed to free his ankles of the bonds which Cuthbert had placed there. Lack of experience in this sort of thing had prevented the lad from making a fast job of it; and as the two started in his direction he struggled to his feet and made a bolt of it.

The ranger was after him hot enough, and overtook him ere he had hardly time to gain headway and make more than a dozen yards.

When the two of them picked him up head and heels, and began carrying him in the direction of the water, he never uttered one word of protest or entreaty, though he did not know but what it was their intention to drop him overboard so as to get rid of an incumbrance. Only his black eyes glowed with defiance and hatred.

This time Old Sile personally saw to his bonds, so there would be no more mistakes. If this thing had happened under other conditions it might have been most serious.

While arranging these matters the veteran took occasion to tell the Otter just what they meant to do with him, and that if all went well he might expect to be a free man inside of forty-eight hours at the most.

Still not a gleam of satisfaction flitted athwart that painted phiz, not a smile or a word to indicate that he rejoiced over the fact of having his days lengthened, only that same old grunt, which might signify anything and everything on occasion:

"Ugh!"

At least he understood that Old Sile was not a man to be defied with impunity, and should he attempt to betray

the little party to his allies, it would be at the risk of his life.

All of which, and more, Old Sile gave him in the Sioux tongue, which he spoke as one to the manner born.

It was now growing dark.

Cuthbert had been engaged in munching upon a portion of food which Karl, with considerate forethought, had brought with him from the snug little camp among the rocks.

This would tide over an emergency, and they could buoy up their spirits in glowing anticipations of the good things to come when once more under the hospitable roof of Sunset Ranch, guests of the big-hearted Kellys.

"Time!" announced the pilot.

Cuthbert likened him to the conductor of an express, standing with watch in hand, and swinging his lantern to the engineer while shouting:

"All aboard!"

They took their places in the boats, Karl, as before, in the stern of the second canoe, with his comrade forward.

Not knowing what trap might have been set for them below, they kept their guns close beside them, ready for action.

A few stars had appeared overhead, but the darkness was rapidly growing intense, which just suited their purpose.

All that was necessary was to steer a course as near the center of the river as possible, and keep a sharp lookout for floating logs, that might endeavor to hobnob in a friendly way with their craft, and create trouble.

Cuthbert was fully alive to the responsibilities of the situation.

All that he had ever heard or read about similar conditions seemed to come sweeping into his brain.

He remembered that in pioneer days on the Ohio, when

settlers traveled on flatboats, the Indians sometimes used to stretch a rope across the river when it was low, in order to bring the floating fort to a stop.

Would these fellows conceive such a scheme as this?

Other possibilities, just as brilliant, floated through his mind.

Thus he was in an excited state that would magnify every minor thing, and they did not pass a floating log or bunch of brush but that Cuthbert eyed it suspiciously, under the belief that it might in some way be connected with a cunning Indian trick.

All seemed to go well.

They were putting miles behind them.

The spring freshet being on, early though it was, the river had swollen greatly. They could even notice a difference since the time they started their boats and went into camp.

Once at least Cuthbert had the satisfaction of making a discovery.

A floating tree was on their right, and as the progress of the unimpeded canoe was much faster than this bulky object, they glided by, Karl with a twist of the paddle keeping well clear of the branches.

It was at this moment Cuthbert uttered a low, startled exclamation.

"I see him!" he said, between his teeth, as he quickly swung his rifle around, and faced the mass of gnarled branches which they were already beginning to leave behind.

"What—who—where?" demanded Karl, one hand groping for his gun.

"In that fork of the tree—he wants to drop overboard—keep away, Karl—it's one of the miserable Indians—a trap, I tell you."

Fortunately Karl had his wits about him.

He, too, saw the dark, crouching object, but was better able to determine its character than the Virginia lad.

With both hands he plied the paddle, and such was his vim that the boat instantly shot away from the vicinity of the floating tree.

At that moment the dark object made a spring through the air.

"Here he comes—holy smoke! it's a panther!" ejaculated the astonished Cuthbert.

The sudden change in the course of the dugout had evidently quite upset the animal's calculations, for though it made the leap, it failed to reach the canoe by several feet.

Even while Cuthbert was airing his suddenly acquired knowledge the baffled beast splashed into the drink.

Karl paddled with all his might.

"Keep on the lookout for him. If he tries to board us, shoot," he said, at the same time using his own eyes to advantage.

Neither of them saw any signs of the ferocious beast, and concluded that he had either gone back to his perch on the floating tree or else struck out boldly for the shore.

How the animal came in such a position they could not understand and would never know, but as the cat tribe hate to wet their feet, it was very plain why he had remained on his perch so long.

"What's the row, younkers?" asked Old Sile, who had held back his boat so that they might draw alongside.

"Only a panther on the tree—he tried to board us, but fell short," remarked Karl, as nonchalantly as though this sort of thing were an everyday occurrence even with him.

The veteran only chuckled in his peculiar way, and after exchanging a few more words with the boys he again drew ahead.

Cuthbert felt a little chagrined to think his fears had magnified the crouching panther into a hostile Indian.

He resolved to make more positive the next time ere committing himself.

After this little excitement they made some progress without a disturbance.

Cuthbert's fears of traps began to fade away.

The fact that thus far they had seen absolutely nothing of the enemy gave him hope that the allies had quit in disgust.

He even hummed a fragment of a jolly cowboy song of the cattle trail, and Karl smiled as he heard it, glad to know his comrade possessed so light a heart.

The sky had clouded over.

A wind had also sprung up, and it began to look as though they might be in for a storm, such as comes with the spring.

The boys did not much enjoy the prospect of getting their jackets wet, especially as there was a chill in the air; but experience on the cattle range had made them something of philosophers with regard to these things.

So they simply dragged out their blankets and bundled up in them like Esquimaux.

Perhaps Old Sile might take mercy and consent to run ashore ere the storm caught them.

They had made good progress and must be many miles on their journey, so that the night would not be wholly wasted.

A fire with its comforts seems doubly precious when circumstances debar one from enjoying its cheer; so Cuthbert found himself yearning for a camp.

This desire grew more positive when the wind began to slap the waves up against the side of the dugout, and splash cold spray over the lad crouching in the bow.

Having scant freeboard the dugouts caught each wave,

and being heavily laden, there seemed at least a chance that ere the boat could rise the water might pour over the bow.

Still, not a word from Cuthbert. He was not much given to complaints, and could take his medicine with the rest.

It lay with Old Sile to determine when they had had enough. He was the pilot, the doctor and the captain of the expedition.

Stronger still the wind.

There would be an accident soon, Cuthbert thought, unless they landed. At any moment a wave, more vigorous than its predecessors, might sweep clean over the bow and swamp them.

Ah! Old Sile must have awakened to a knowledge of the fact—perhaps a comber had doused the Indian lying in the bottom of his boat; at any rate, he changed his course and was now headed diagonally for the shore.

Cuthbert felt like giving a cowboy yell, but had to take it out in a grunt, as the other would have surely brought down condemnation upon his head from the pilot.

The wind could riot as it pleased, since they need no longer fear its violence.

But Old Sile had no intention of landing as yet.

He only meant to gain the smoother water near the shore, where the gale would not add to the danger of their progress.

Here they glided along.

The trees close by bent and moaned under the fury of the wind, but shielded those in the boats.

There was no opportunity to relax their vigilance. Cuthbert kept a keen lookout for jutting points, while Karl used the paddle to sound for bottom as they passed along, though Old Sile, ahead, was doing his duty, and they might trust themselves to follow where he led.

It was while thus moving on that they heard the plain report of a gun from up the river.

Three times it came to their ears.

Even Cuthbert jumped to the conclusion that it meant something, and was in the nature of a signal.

He aroused himself, as though under the belief that the crisis was not far off. Plainly, Caleb Cross was a very stubborn sort of a chap, and, with his red allies, did not mean to give up the game so long as a single hope remained.

"What's that light ahead?" asked Cuthbert a minute or so later.

Karl and Old Sile had also noticed it.

Even as they looked it grew brighter.

Surely the moon could not be rising, and that was not the right quarter at all—at least, so far as Cuthbert could remember, he had never yet seen the mistress of the night wheel into view above the westrn horizon.

A fire then!

Had the woods been set ablaze? He could never forget the experience which befell Karl and himself on the night of their first meeting, and how they raced with a prairie fire.

Perhaps a new adventure, that was to even excel that perilous chase, awaited them now, and they would possibly have to run a gantlet of flames in their canoes.

Old Sile put inshore.

This was a move that pleased Cuthbert exceedingly, though, for the life of him, he was quite unable to see how their condition would be rendered any safer.

He eagerly awaited the pilot's explanation.

Old Sile was plainly wroth.

"A measly ole trick, an' to think we're to be held back by sich a low-down game," he said.

Karl may have understood, but to the other it was all Greek.

"Ain't the woods on fire, Uncle Sile?" he demanded, in a tone that made the other chuckle.

"Wall, no, I reckon as how they ain't jest yet, sonny; but them pesky critters hev gone an' made a blaze on the shore, an' we can't go by without bein' diskivered."

Cuthbert sighed in relief.

If that were the worst, they could perhaps hide their boats and go inland to seek some shelter from the approaching storm.

He advanced as much to the guide.

"It's well put, younker, but several things kinder head us off. Fust place, ye see, thar's mighty poor kiver around here for the boats. Then, agin, the shore ain't sich as I fancy—looks low and swampy, as though the rise in the river had begun to flood back among the timber."

"Perhaps we might find a chance to paddle our canoes through the woods, and in that way get past the fire," suggested Cuthbert.

"Another bright ijee, but I'm afraid the water ain't deep enough yet, an', gee whiz, it'd be an orful undertakin' in the dark and storm."

"Well?"

"My opinion, clean an' unprejudiced, are this: We'll move down to the p'int yonder, takin' great care to not expose ourselves. I reckons on bein' able to take a squar squint at the situation while we hang out thar, an' I declar to Moses, ef thar's half a chance I'm willin' to try the riffle and float past, keepin' as nigh this shore as we kin."

Somehow his boldness electrified the boys.

Cuthbert felt like shouting again, while Karl simply uttered the one word:

"Good!"

Immediately they began to once more let the boats move down with the current.

At the point a hold-up occurred.

The fire was in plain view; as Old Sile had believed it was on the other shore; but, with the flames dancing high in the stormy wind, the whole surface of the river was lighted up.

Still, there were times when a streak of shadow lay along their shore, and this tempted the old ranger amazingly.

He knew in his soul it would be the part of wisdom for them to land above and await a change in the existing conditions. It was out of all reason to believe that those who seemed bent upon throwing so much light upon the subject could keep the fire going indefinitely, with a storm brewing that might descend at any moment with a grand hurrah to wet their wood, kill the blaze and drive them to shelter.

And yet there seemed to be some peculiar fascination about this running the river gantlet.

It was hard for the veteran to refuse a dare.

Like many another man, he took the burden off his own shoulders and placed it upon those of his comrades.

"What shall we do, younkers; hold back an' wait to see if the rain washes 'em out, or take the bit in our teeth an' run by?"

"I say go," came immediately from the impulsive Virginian. Whoever knew one of his race to hesitate because danger beset the way?

Karl took a few seconds to think.

Doubtless he considered what their chances of discovery would be in case the party above searched the shores as they came down stream.

"Perhaps we might do worse," he said, at length.

Karl placed considerable dependence upon the sagacity of the old pilot. If anybody could carry them through this scrape without disaster surely Sile might.

"Now listen," said that worthy, impressively.

In the plainest of language he told them just what each was to do, and how they would act in an emergency should the worst come in the shape of discovery.

"Understand?" he questioned, in conclusion, and both of them answered yes.

More shots came from up river.

"Them critters air gittin' hot arter us. But the time has kim—let her go, Karl."

Both dugouts floated around the point and down the stream.

The boys had settled down flat in the bottom of their boat, where they sprawled amid the various packages that went to make up their outfit, hardly daring to raise a head, and almost holding their very breath in suspense.

Of course, given a very brief time and the steady current would sweep them down stream beyond range of the illumination, even when the fire was at its best.

The question at issue was whether they were to be allowed that time, or would some wandering pair of eager eyes discover them.

In the uncertain light the dugouts looked not unlike drifting logs, and might be mistaken for such.

To Cuthbert this was an experience such as he was never likely to forget.

His very heart seemed to stand still, and he held his breath as the boat swept around the bend until it floated upon the broader water, and was really within the arc of the illumination.

Karl kept one arm over the gunwale, and, by means of the paddle, managed to steer to some extent, so that the canoe kept her head pointed down stream. This

might seem like a small thing, but should there be sudden need of haste, on account of discovery, it would count for a good deal to be in complete readiness for a supreme effort.

Such little things show the prairie training, and Cuthbert, as he lay there, saw with admiration how easily his comrade accomplished the object he had in view.

They were making good progress.

Of course, Cuthbert need not bob up his head in order to know this. He was acquainted with the current on which they floated, and the speed with which, in its swollen state, the river rushed along.

There was also another method of learning just how rapidly their craft was being swept down stream. In many places the pines growing along the shore bent over the water, and, as he lay there, Cuthbert could watch these tops outlined against the clouds, passing, seemingly, in an endless procession.

They were more or less touched by the firelight from the other shore, and Cuthbert, noting how bright everything was around, could not imagine their luck would be so great as to swing them past without discovery.

Yet it began to look that way, sure enough.

How much time had elapsed since they rounded the point he never could have told. If measured by his strained feelings, it must have been hours, when his common sense told him seconds would be nearer the mark.

He did know, however, that they had actually passed the fire, and with every second were drawing further away from the danger point.

Still no shout of wild alarm betokened discovery.

Cuthbert could have hugged himself with gratification at the prospect of success. This sort of an adventure aroused all his love for daring, and would be a feat worth telling around a cowboy round-up camp fire.

His congratulations, however, turned out to be a trifle premature, since they were not yet out of the woods.

What he had dreaded to hear suddenly came to pass—a fierce whoop rang over the river, sounding with startling distinctness.

To the boy's utter amazement, it came from just in front, and his first alarming thought was that a trap had been laid, into which they were unwittingly drifting.

Of course, further concealment was now utterly out of the question, and Karl was already on his knees, ready to bend to his paddle with a desperation that promised big results.

As Cuthbert struggled to his knees, he had a glimpse of the boat ahead. Old Sile was on deck, and just in the act of bringing his uplifted paddle down upon some dark object further forward in the boat. There was a crash, and the Otter fell back limp and lifeless. Then it was no trap at all, but treachery on the part of the prisoner, who, piqued at the success of the daring trick that was being played upon his confederates, had risked his life to give the alarm.

CHAPTER XX.

BACK TO DEAR OLD SUNSET RANCH.

The alarm cry of the desperate prisoner was echoed almost immediately from the shore.

Of course, there was no longer any reason why the fugitives should allow caution to interfere with their progress, and it was Old Sile, who, having reduced the refractory prisoner to a state of submission with his spruce blade, now dipped the latter in the water, and shouted:

"Paddle, younkers; paddle for all that's out!"

And they did most lustily. Karl was at work just as soon as the pilot, and Cuthbert came in a good third; for, realizing that if the "pen was mightier than the sword" in some instances, a fellow of his size might do more good with the paddle than with the gun.

Thus they rushed down stream with an impetus that immediately carried them beyond the furtherest glow of the fire, and into that darkness covering the river below.

Somhow Cuthbert found the stirring lines of that dashing old-time story ringing through his head, where young Lochinvar carries off his sweetheart just as she is about to be married to a rival, and, mounting his splendid steed, dashes through the night.

> "'They'll have swift steeds who follow,'
> Quoth young Lochinvar."

So thought Cuthbert, thrilled with the exhilaration caused by their rapid passage down the mystic river flood—they must have been speedy boats, propelled by muscular arms and urged on by bold hearts, if they dared follow the lead of the fugitives.

For many risks were taken in thus rushing headlong

down the stream, where drifting logs and other snags threatened disaster.

Cuthbert, as he paddled, keeping time with the lad in the stern, watched for the white spot that marked the tail end of Old Sile's boat. That was his guiding star, and so long as he managed to keep it within a reasonable distance he knew all was going well.

It was a wild, thrilling race.

They knew full well their enemies must have jumped into their boats and started in hot pursuit.

How many they numbered no one knew, but the odds were probably trebly against them, and Old Sile, for the sake of his *protégés,* more than anything else, desired to avoid a conflict if it could by any reasonable means be accomplished.

In olden days he would undoubtedly have been otherwise disposed, and liked nothing better than to lay an ambush for the rascals, in which destruction would await them; but the old, fierce fever did not run so hotly in Sile's veins now, and the Indians were not just the same as he had fought three decades or more gone by.

The leading boat did not do what it should, and Cuthbert knew it was overloaded.

He was, therefore, not much surprised, when they had gone some miles in this reckless way, to hear the pilot call out that he intended to slow up for a brief time in order to get rid of his unwelcome passenger.

He cut the Otter's bonds, and then came a splash as he tumbled the struggling brave over into the drink.

For the second time the Otter took to the river without any choice on his part.

The shore was close at hand, so that he could readily reach it.

Our friends concerned themselves no further about his fortunes or mishaps. The fellow had fared much better

than he deserved after the excessive trouble he caused them, and might in time to come thank his stars he had fallen into the hands of such merciful enemies.

Once more Old Sile plied the paddle, and now his dug-out showed a wonderful increase in speed, since it was properly balanced.

All this had occurred in a very short space of time, but the storm was gathering very fast.

To avoid the fiercest of the foam-capped waves, they were compelled to hug the sheltered shore.

The pursuers had made no sign, but Cuthbert felt sure they still followed, and he cast frequent glances over his shoulder into the black waste through which they had just rushed with such headlong speed.

Old Sile was not in love with this sort of thing, and had about determined that he was quite satisfied.

Cuthbert heard him call again with sudden vehemence: "Hold hard, younkers, hold hard!"

Perhaps there was some threatening danger ahead, some obstruction against which if the boats were hurled at the speed they were going, destruction must follow.

It is not the easiest thing in the world to stop a run-away canoe favored by a roaring current; but there are tricks of the paddle, known to all who have learned its secrets, whereby even this is possible.

To Cuthbert's surprise and intense satisfaction he saw Old Sile paddling shoreward.

Then the end of the night's run was at hand, and the veteran absolutely refused to be chased another rod.

Cuthbert, cold and stiff, felt like shouting "hallelujah," as once more visions of a warm camp fire flitted across his mental vision.

Then he began to comprehend what was in the wind, for as they approached the shore line he saw the open mouth of a creek.

No doubt Old Sile had been keenly looking for just this place to turn in.

At least he led them past the point and up its dark waters with the positive manner of one who knew where he was going.

In a short time they landed, secreted the boats, so arranged that a deluge of rain would not cause any injury to their cargoes, and taking a blanket apiece, together with suppplies, marched over some exceedingly rough ground.

"Another bear's den," said Cuthbert, in some awe, as they halted beside an opening in the rocks.

Old Sile made sure the place had no ferocious occupant ere he led his boys within; nor had either of them the slightest desire for an encounter with one of those wicked old "mountain Charlies."

Here they found comfort.

Great haste was made to secure some wood ere the deluge descended, and in this they were peculiarly fortunate, since a tumble-down tree lay shattered almost at the mouth of the den, and so industriously did the three voyagers work, that pretty much the entire mass of fuel had been transferred to the cave by the time the rain began to pour down.

It was a wild storm indeed, and woe to the wretch without shelter while its fury lasted. The wind howled and the rain beat down in torrents, while the first crashes of thunder of the season made the earth tremble.

What cared our three adventurous spirits?

A cheery fire burned inside the old den, the smoke sifting through crevices above.

They had blocked the entrance pretty well, so there was not a chance in a million that their hiding-place could be discovered, even if their enemies were searching,

which, considering the state of the weather, it was pretty positive they were not.

Cuthbert was a happy chap.

At last he could feast his eyes upon the ruddy glowing embers, and toast his chilled hands and feet in their genial warmth.

How he did love a fire! To him it represented much of the weird fascination that the wilderness has for the hunter-naturalist's soul.

Little they cared how the storm tore over the hills and through the valleys, wrecking many a fine tree in its wild rush.

Snugly ensconced in this secure den they could defy the elements.

They slept well, too, though the stone bed was rather hard, despite the blankets.

In the morning, during a lull in the downpour, Old Sile made a trip to the boats to see that all was well, and brought back with him the balance of their small stock of provisions.

Another night passed.

The storm petered out, but Old Sile was in no great hurry to go on, so they lingered in their snug retreat until the third day.

Then, their supply of fuel having given out, and their food reaching a very low ebb, he gave the order to embark.

The country was pretty well inundated, and it would be impossible to voyage during the hours of darkness, since the risk of mishaps was too great.

Old Sile gave the boys to understand that his patience had been tried to the limit, and that if, from this time on, Caleb Cross and his red allies made their appearance and attempted any more of their tricks, he meant to mete out

the sternest border punishment, and use his deadly rifle on the miscreants.

Fortunately for all parties concerned, this meeting did not take place.

The storm had driven the allies to cover, and when it was over they were ready to give up the chase in disgust.

On the third day Cuthbert made a grand discovery.

They had landed to cook a frugal lunch, and Cuthbert, rifle in hand, had wandered off, in the hope of discovering a deer, since fresh venison would have been a bonanza after the long period of living upon the jerked stuff.

He came hurrying into camp later, brimming over with excitement, but Karl was not alarmed, since he quickly saw it was pleasure that caused his beaming face.

"There's a whole camp of bluecoats just a mile from here. If the wind came from that quarter you'd hear 'em," he shouted.

Karl threw the frying-pan into the air.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "We'll get something now besides this dry, old elk strip. What d'ye say, Uncle Sile; shall we head for the camp?"

The veteran was only too eager. He had for two days been out of tobacco, and any old smoker may realize the agonies he suffered.

So they tumbled their traps into the twin boats pell-mell, and went rioting down stream.

Turning a bend, there was the camp, sure enough, with a flag floating over it, and men in blue moving hither and thither.

A sentry challenged, for times were perilous, and the Indians exceeding bold.

They were taken before the officer commanding the detachment, and in Major Burt the veteran found an old and much-admired friend, with whom he had many times hunted antelope in the neighborhood of the army post.

Their reception was a most hearty one, and their wants soon supplied, as well as the larder of the camp would permit.

In the genial major the boys found a friend who envinced the keenest interest in their adventurous career.

Himself more or less of a literary turn, the major could appreciate what a halo of romance there was over Cuthbert's search for his girl relative, and the remarkable manner of her discovery after he had long known her at Sunset Ranch.

A strict disciplinarian, he was also the idol of his men, who were ready to go through blood to serve the major.

He would have detained the little party longer, but they were anxious to reach civilization, while he had work of a serious nature cut out for him in this hostile region; so with a hearty handshake and a mutual godspeed, they finally separated, our little band proceeding down stream.

Their adventures were at an end so far as the winter in the wilderness was concerned; and presently they could be looking complacently back over the strange events that had marked their season with that subtle pleasure known only to those who have "been there" and had the experience, when troubles fade away and only joys loom up.

At the fort they left Old Sile, who desired to meet a fur trader, expected any day, and dispose of his valuable pelts.

They parted from the veteran with genuine regret, and there was a suspicious moisture in Old Sile's eyes, that could not be wholly laid at the door of the wood smoke blowing across the parade ground, as he stood beside the army wagon that was to convey the boys and their luggage to a point where they could get transportation to dear old Sunset Ranch.

Long would they remember him and his sterling character, and many times would Cuthbert fancy he heard

that odd little chuckle in which Old Sile indulged whenever either of the lads had done something that appealed to his dry sense of humor.

And now they were on the last stage of their journey.

Cuthbert frankly admitted that, keen though his desire had been to embark on the winter's campaign, it could not compare with the exhilaration that possessed him now at the prospect of again feasting his eyes on the familiar scenes toward which his heart had been drawn so strongly from time to time.

It was a happy day when Karl and himself, having secured a brace of bronchos, galloped out upon the prairie ahead of the vehicle that conveyed their luggage, with presents for all at the ranch.

Spring had set in.

The soft, green verdure, a few early wild flowers, the joyous notes of birds in the air, a blue sky overhead, and the soft, genial atmosphere around—who would not be overjoyed at feeling a bounding steed beneath him, and a sense of freedom expanding his soul?

They gazed around like hungry men who had suddenly been placed at a feast.

This was what was life to them, what their hearts had long yearned to possess, and now they were in a position to grasp it.

Even staid Karl, who seldom gave vent to cowboy enthusiasm, chased the first rabbit he saw, shouting at the top of his voice and waving his hat wildly in the air.

And Cuthbert was himself almost like one intoxicated with joy. He sang and whooped, he chased skulking coyotes and wolves, and seemed never to weary of the work.

Why not?

They were on the way to Sunset Ranch.

Ere nightfall their eyes would be gladdened by a sight

of the familiar buildings, and then would come the meeting with those friends never to be forgotten.

It was the happiest day of Cuthbert's life.

Anticipation is often as pleasurable as the actual experience itself, and boys usually get their share of delight in both.

The ponies were about used up.

Hardy little beasts as they were, it was extremely doubtful whether they ever passed such a day as this, with the many mad races to one side and the various twistings caused by getting off the main trail.

Then familiar objects began to loom up.

Never had they appeared half so dear as now, after a six months' absence.

Why, Cuthbert even found himself surveying with some show of affection a miserable little prairie-dog village that had once been the scene of a bad tumble for him.

This was a joyous day, when he felt as though it must be easy to obey the Scriptural injunction and love even his enemies.

Then, in the distance, they discovered the strip of timber so well known, the big stock corral, and the whitewashed buildings of the ranch itself.

How it thrilled their hearts!

Later on, when other months had flown, and they were far away in the land of the Montezumas, seeing life on a wonderful Mexican cattle ranch, their thoughts would often turn backward, and through their mind would run visions of this lovely view.

Closer still.

Now they saw herds of cattle moving toward the corral, and even caught the shouts of the leather-chapped cowboys who circled each knot, urging them in the right direction.

How picturesque!

Could anything on earth equal it?

Cuthbert thought not, and yet Karl, who had been brought up to this wild life, had heart yearnings in regard to the wonders of the world to the far east, and even beyond the great salt sea, upon which his eager eyes had never as yet rested.

The homestretch lay before them, and the weary broncho found the spurs urging him to a last glorious lap.

With voices husky from long-continued shouting, and hats waving wildly in the air, the two returned wanderers dashed along.

They had now been recognized, and answering whoops came from their old pards of the range, who in this noisy way bade them welcome home. The cattle bellowed and clashed their long horns, dogs barked, chickens cackled, and the whole ranch seemed to unite in one grand and glorious vociferous reception.

And there, upon the long porch, were Mr. Kelly and his warm-hearted wife, together with a dancing little sprite, who waved her kerchief and joined her shrill, sweet voice in cowboy shouts such as she had learned in her mad gallops with our boys.

Yes, it was Little Sunshine, eager to welcome them, and here was home indeed, at dear old Sunset Ranch.

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